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WALK INTO MY PARLOR

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By

Margaret Lane



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WALK INTO MY PARLOR

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FIRST EDITION

H-Q

TO
MY MOTHER



WALK INTO MY PARLOR

Chapter I

(1891)

EMMA LIFTED HER HEAD FROM THE PILLOW AND listened. The first cab had come. It had turned by the spotted laurels and was circling the gravel to arrive with its left side facing the front door. Now it had stopped, and the driver would be putting his whip in the socket and climbing down. She raised herself quickly on one elbow. If it were Mr. Morton the fare would be paid briskly, the door bang, and the bell in the kitchen passage leap and jangle, setting the other bells vibrating and bringing Bessie up the back stairs at a run. If it were the Godfreys the process would be slower, and there would be voices, jocularly conversational, to cover the awkward pause while the cabman from layers of clothing exhumed the change. Then one of the Miss Godfreys would ring the bell with a firm light pull, and after a decent interval Bessie would advance in orderly fashion, carrying her hands at a fastidious angle under her starched cuffs; and presently the stairs would creak as she preceded them to Mrs. Shardiloe's bedroom on the first floor, where they would lay their hats and coats on the eiderdown, and delicately raise the flattened rolls of their hair with the point of a hat pin.

It was a cold night, and the windows were closed and curtained, muffling the sounds that Emma strained to hear. The door of the cab banged dully below and the wheels started forward over the gravel, but she could distinguish no voices. In sudden impatience she thrust back the blankets and dropped her thin legs over the edge of the bed. The linoleum stung like ice, but until she had introduced some light she would not risk feeling for her felt slippers, shot, as she knew they must be by her leap into bed, far into the dangerous cavern under the bedstead. The darkness menaced her. For a second she hesitated, lips parted, eyes staring in the direction of the window: the cold iron frame of the bedstead touched her calves and she drew up her feet in panic. Then from below came the reassuring sound of the

front door shutting, and her mother's voice, her welcoming voice, clear and ringing. She sprang across the floor and snatched back the heavy curtains with both hands, making the rings rattle.

A pale light opened like a fan over the ceiling, showing the room dimly as it had always been. Whatever dwelt in the darkness withdrew behind the wardrobe and under the bed. Emma breathed on the pane, rubbed a clear patch in the light traceries of frost, and pressed her forehead cautiously against the glass. Rays from the lantern over the front steps touched the sparkling fringes of the patch, so that she looked down through a luminous halo, and could see nothing.

She bent her knees slightly to stand on the hem of her nightgown, and with her right foot drew a warm fold over her left and held it there. The cab was moving slowly down the drive, its lamps flickering in jerks over the sooty bushes. At the gate two more lamps turned in to meet it and paused while the first cab drew clear. Would Mr. Morton be in the second cab? She strained her eyes against the up-thrown light and against the darkness. In summer one could see everything that went on; in summer it was worth while to stand at the window. The windows were open then, and if there was singing in the drawing room it kept her awake, tantalized and miserable, until everyone had gone. And not so long ago there had been splendid drama provided by the servant next door.

The Bartletts had gone to the seaside and left her in charge, never dreaming (as Bessie claimed she had suspected all along) that when the house was empty she sometimes stayed out all night. Somebody must have told, for a week before they were due to return Mr. Bartlett had come back with a carpenter in the middle of the night and changed the locks. They had worked quietly, but Emma, a fragile sleeper, had been wakened by the tramp of feet between the two houses, and from the side window had watched them going to and fro with a lantern. About five o'clock in the morning the servant had come home, and after struggling with her keys for some time had started a futile hysterical knocking on the front door, and Emma had leaped up again, and wrapped herself in the white honeycomb counterpane, and watched. The girl had gone helplessly backwards and forwards between the front door and the back, knocking and rattling, had tried all the ground-floor windows in turn, and then given up hope and sat on the front steps noisily crying, her face smudged with tears and her hair coming down, abjectly awaiting her fate.

Emma had been torn between the pride of being sole witness of this enthralling scene and the desire to communicate excitement, and in the end she had crept into Lily's room and wakened her, and the sisters had watched together. And at eight o'clock Fate, in the person of Mr. Bartlett, had arrived in a growler and denounced the girl in harsh tones on the doorstep; and then had admitted her with his new key, but only long enough to pack and cord her box; and Bessie, forgetting her old jealous scorn in the sweet pleasure of scandal, had dramatically helped her to carry it to the tram. Bessie had been more shocked than anyone, and had kept on saying: "T'nt it *awful*, 'm?" over and over again, whenever she caught sight of Mrs. Shardiloe; but there had been something a little uneasy about her indignation, as though it had been defensive rather than positive censure, and as if she would really have liked to know much more about Martha's delinquency. "Whatever do you think she *done*?" she had asked Emma, pausing in her ironing to exchange a long and searching gaze with the child standing so attentively on the other side of the table. "What I want to know is, where did she *sleep*?" And Emma could not tell her.

The second cab turned on the sweep of gravel and came to a standstill. The step creaked, somebody got down briskly and banged the door, and in another moment the wheels had moved on and the bell in the stone passage was pealing a summons that echoed all over the house. Mr. Morton, Mr. *Morton*! Emma skipped across the room, lightly touching the foot of the bed in passing, and opened the door. She listened, then went out on the landing and craned over the banister, peering down the draughty well of the stair. She caught a glimpse of Bessie's white cuff and streamers as she flew up from the kitchen, and in a moment his rich voice was in the hall.

"Well, Bessie, what have you got for us tonight?" It was always the same; always the same little panting pause while Bessie giggled and struggled to help him off with his overcoat and muffler; then Mr. Morton, after smoothing his perfectly brushed hair in front of the hall mirror and lightly boosting up either side of his mustache with an arched forefinger, would clap his hands together and rub them zestfully; and Bessie, hanging her head to hide her grins, would lead the way to the drawing room.

There was always something special for supper when Mr. Morton came. Old friend though he was, he was not a man one invited to take

pot luck. Tom Shardiloe had once, early in their acquaintance, made that mistake, and Mr. Morton had surprised him by adding to his thanks a grave inquiry as to what he might expect. Mr. Shardiloe had not been sure, but answered with some loss of confidence that he thought his wife had mentioned oxtail stew; whereupon his friend, with real regret in his voice, had said: "Thanks, old man, but that's one thing I don't care about; don't care about it at all," and had offered no further excuse for his refusal. Indeed, to his mind no other excuse was necessary; he took an anxious interest in whatever went into his stomach, and was saddened by being offered family fare. Food was the dearest topic of his conversation, and so skillfully had he contrived to intimidate his friends that to invite Mr. Morton to a meal was almost tantamount to issuing a challenge. His hostess knew beforehand that whatever she offered him would be analyzed and commented on, sometimes with disconcerting candor. His asking for a second helping was a triumph to be reported in the kitchen, and his silence over the roast could spoil a meal. On the strength of this legend Mr. Morton, who was not a rich man and who dined at home indifferently without complaint, enjoyed the best of everything that his friends could afford, and was able to eat a great many meals at other people's expense with a flattering air of somehow conferring a favor.

The Shardiloes were good eaters: they prided themselves on large joints, thick gravies, and plentiful puddings: but Mr. Morton's accounts of the meals he had eaten in France, the way he would turn up his eyes when he mentioned a sauce or wave his hands over the memory of oysters consumed in some restaurant, were plainly beyond them. They felt that here was some mystery which they would never quite arrive at, but which for the sake of self-respect they must pretend to understand; and accordingly on the days when Mr. Morton was coming Mrs. Shardiloe herself went down to the kitchen, where her ignorance and authority made things exceedingly difficult for Bessie.

The drawing-room door opened, and a burst of voices came up the well of the stairs. Emma clung to the banisters, hooking her arms over them and raising herself ardently on her toes. They must all be there by now. Miss Faurey had come in the middle of the afternoon and had read a novel to Mrs. Shardiloe while she rested, and had

helped her with her hair. The Godfreys must have arrived in the first cab, for the last had undoubtedly carried Mr. Morton.

Emma loved Mr. Morton. Recently, on her eleventh birthday, he had done three of his tricks in the dining room after tea, talking all the time just as he did in the theater, turning back his cuffs and displaying his beautifully kept white hands back and front to show there was no deception; and she had been allowed to keep the things that his magic had brought forth. There were three silk handkerchiefs, red, white and blue, knotted together at the corners, which he had obtained by putting her own grubby pocket handkerchief and Lily's and her father's into a glass globe full of clean water and covering it with a cloth. And afterwards the handkerchiefs had come out red, white and blue, and much larger, and there had been goldfish swimming about in the water as well. The subsequent life of the goldfish had been brief and unrewarding, but there were still the mice. Right at the end, when he was starting to pack up his table and cloth, he had suddenly looked very hard at Emma's father, said: "By Jove, excuse me, Tom," and had taken a dazed white mouse from the back of his collar. And a minute afterwards he had spun round on Miss Fairey and said, almost angrily: "Are you aware, madam, that there are rodents nesting in your hair?"—and had plucked another from the back-combed mass of her fringe. Emma had received both the mice in the apron of her pinafore, and they had been one of the props of existence ever since.

Now the drawing-room door was shut, and the party cut off. Even Bessie had scuttled back to the basement, banging the scullery door behind her so that the clatter of dishes should not offend the company. The house was quiet. On the landing below the grandfather clock hesitated and whirred dryly for nine o'clock, and then, since the strike had been long ago cut out of him for the sake of Mrs. Shardloe's nerves, resumed his heavy, hollow, slightly irregular ticking. A chill of self-pity fell upon Emma, and she shivered. Down in the drawing room the fire would be big and lively, winking on the polished fender and on the mother-of-pearl piano which was never played; and Lily, flushed and demure in her accordion-pleated dress, would be sitting on the sofa beside her mother. Her father and Mr. Morton would be rocking gently on their heels on the sheepskin rug, and the four Godfreys, small, neat and muscular, would be smiling attentive smiles from the four armchairs. And in the dining room the shaded

lamps would be already lit, throwing their pink glow over the silver stags and the tureens. Emma sank on her heels, clutching the banisters and laying her face against them, like a small expectant animal behind bars.

A door opened below on the first-floor landing, and pottering feet moved over the carpet in the direction of the lavatory. Emma stiffened. She could hear the old woman grunting as she moved.

"*Gran'ma*," she wailed.

The feet stopped, but the grunting went on, on each outward breath a slight, complaining "ugh."

"Eh?" said her grandmother, "what is it?"

Emma adopted a whining tone. "I want a drink of water," she said.

Grandma was silent, reviewing difficulties: the stairs; trying to find a cup; perhaps encountering her daughter, who had sent her to bed more than an hour ago.

"Can't 'ear a word the child says," she grumbled at length, and shuffled grunting along the passage before Emma should call again.

Grandma was as much out of things as Emma, and though she resented her exclusion less passionately than the child, she pitied herself, and made the most of her troubles. She would have liked at that moment to be sitting by the fire with the company, wearing her stiff black silk and her gold chains and rings, and the little tiered cap of fine lace and Parma violets which hid the pink scalp where hair was scanty; but Mrs. Shardiloe found her mother a nuisance, and sent her to bed early when visitors came. It was not that Grandma was really troublesome, but she was a dead weight; and she had besides some irritating habits which it was too late to correct. That grunting, for instance; you never noticed it when people were talking, but whenever there was a pause you realized she was at it again, grunt, grunt, grunt, staring complacently into the fire and nodding her head. Then there was another trick she had which could drive you wild. She would start smoothing down the lap of her dress with her clutched hand, and forget to stop, and the shriveled fist, usually clutching a handkerchief, would move up and down, up and down over her lap, quite absently, for half an hour at a stretch. She had worn out the laps of countless dresses in this fashion, but refused to wear an apron. "I can't 'elp it," she always said when shouted at, "I don't know when I'm doin' it." And in a minute the knotted hand would creep out again and stealthily start the up-and-down stroking

of the smooth silk. After supper she usually fell asleep, her head stretched forward and the skin of her neck taut, looking unpleasantly like a tortoise; and people instinctively dropped their voices and glanced at the clock. Years in the theater had given Mrs. Shardiloe a distaste for early hours, whether of rising or retiring, and more than one pleasant evening had been broken up by her mother's senile dozing. Yet it was no good trying to persuade Mrs. Hignett to leave the party at a reasonable hour, as any other old woman of nearly eighty would have been glad to do. Ignoring hints and resenting plainer suggestions, she would sit it out to the bitter end with a sort of grim resolution, making everyone uncomfortable; sleeping grotesquely and waking up with tiresome suddenness to demand what her son-in-law had been saying. And toward midnight her small bright reptile eyes would be fixed on the door, watching for bottles of stout and light refreshments.

"Whyn't you have a glass of hot milk, Ma, and go to bed?" Mrs. Shardiloe would ask, doing her best to keep irritation out of her voice. But Mrs. Hignett would pretend not to hear, and sit grunting and stroking her dress, her ears jealously cocked, as her daughter well knew, for the approaching tinkle.

So it was very much easier to send her to bed before anyone arrived, when there were no visitors about (except, perhaps, Miss Fairey, who did not matter) to hear her accusations and complaints, or the suppressed groans with which she dragged herself upstairs. She often contrived nevertheless to make her presence felt by pottering about on the landing while people were removing their coats, or appearing halfway down the stairs, wearing a dirty dressing gown and shawl and an air of pathos, one hand pressed to her bosom and the other clutching the banister, when they came from the dining room after supper. Miss Fairey, coached by Mrs. Shardiloe, knew to take no notice, or to urge her upstairs again with a firm hand under her elbow when nobody was looking; but Mr. Morton's politeness always made him stop and ask her how she did, which was what she wanted, and just what the Shardiloes, who knew her tricks, were anxious to avoid. "I'm very poorly," she would quaver in answer to his question, "very poorly indeed"; conveying an impression of neglected invalidism, of a poor old woman whom nobody wanted, and who could perish alone in her misery for all anyone cared while the gay life of the household went on below. One New Year's Eve Mrs.

Shardiloe, apprehensive of some such performance, had locked her in her room, but the old woman had been more than a match for this strategy. Her bedroom was directly over the drawing room, and she had dragged her furniture about with such alarming force that everyone had looked nervously at the chandelier, and fragments of mantle had fallen onto the carpet. Finally there had come such a bump and groan that her daughter had run upstairs in a panic with her guests at her heels, only to find Grandma, tears of effort and self-pity coursing down her cheeks, whimpering that she could not sleep and that someone had hidden her spectacles.

On the dark landing, miserable and cold, Emma began to sniff. Nobody loved her, nobody cared. Like Grandma she, too, could die and nobody would notice. Or would they? She caught her breath and prayed fiercely that God would take her. Then they would be sorry. Then they would remember how pathetic she had been, and would shed tears, and be ashamed of their cruelty. Lily would be pushed into the background then; Lily would be nothing. She saw herself stretched out on her bed, surrounded by flowers and the sorrowing bent heads of her family. "Oh, Lord," she prayed, screwing up her eyes, "let me die tonight. Take me to Thyself, Please, oh Lord!" She waited for a moment, frightened and half-expectant, but did not say Amen. Perhaps that was why God failed to answer. Amen might have settled it. Relaxing from the effort of prayer, and somewhat relieved, she got up and went back into her bedroom. It was too cold to stay on the landing any longer, and besides, she wanted to think. She had dared God to take her, and He had not done so; at least, not yet. She was a little exhilarated by her own recklessness, yet not altogether easy. He might decide to do it while she was asleep, which was not what she wanted. But then, after all, she had not said Amen. Without that magic word the prayer, perhaps, would not count. She climbed into bed, hunched herself up against the pillows and dragged the blankets after her.

The bitter thing was that Lily, who was only two years older, was sometimes allowed to stay up for these late parties, and, what was more, to sing. After supper Mrs. Shardiloe would sit fondly down to the piano, and Lily's clear fluting treble would steal up through the accompaniment, hatefully, enchantingly sweet. The notes, so gay and childish in the drawing room, sounded faint and unutterably melancholy at the top of the house, sharpening the forlorn solitude

of the child who lay still in the stuffy dark upstairs. She longed for the party to finish, so that the music would stop; longed at the same time to be downstairs and the center of attraction, turning over for her mother as she played, sitting on Mr. Morton's knee, outshining Lily. Lily was her parents' favorite, and second place was made no less painful by the realization that the preference was justified. Lily had inherited her mother's curling hair and doll's complexion; at thirteen she was already tall and carried herself consciously, tossing her long pale ringlets over her shoulders and smiling at herself in the glass when she thought she was alone. She had talent, too, of a light, performing sort; could sing prettily and dance a skirt dance, doing high kicks and low curtsies, and was always the star of the Christmas concerts at school. She displayed her most winning side in grown-up company, but at school she also had a certain following; there were several girls who were proud to walk round the playground with her, arms entwined, heads bent, exchanging confidences. Emma enjoyed a little reflected glory from being her sister, but there, since comparison came in, the advantage ended. Emma was small, sallow and notoriously difficult. She thirsted for approval, but poor health had made her nervous and her temper uncertain, and consequently it rarely came her way. A bad disposition, her mother said, and could never make up her mind on the best way to cure it. She alternately punished and commiserated; was too severe, then too yielding and emotional; and Emma, who in babyhood had adored her mother with possessive fierceness, lost confidence, and took refuge in unchildish moods and obstinacy. Punishment had never had a good effect; a whipping produced, as like as not, a fit of that screaming temper which was the worst crime of all, and which left the child shaken, wretched, sick and hating everybody. This form of punishment had, indeed, been discontinued on the advice of old Dr. Ashe, whose opinion Mrs. Shardiloe respected. "You'll ruin the child's temperament," he had said mildly. "Shut her up if you like, ma'am, or give her bread and water for supper: but don't strike her." So Mrs. Shardiloe, though doubtfully, had changed her tactics, and for her former hysterical slappings had substituted imprisonment in the box-room, or, when Emma's crime had been especially heinous, in a dark closet on the first-floor landing which was used as a linen cupboard. Emma's dread of the dark had made this cupboard monstrous, so that she always, even in daylight, passed it at a run; and this fear had taught her new methods of propitiation. Tears,

protestations of affection and wild apologies sometimes worked wonders with Mrs. Shardiloe, who felt a curious sense of relief in the sight of any violent emotion, and in whom the exhilaration of power sometimes produced a sudden and melting benevolence. Then she would overwhelm Emma with affectionate reproaches, bring her to tears if she were not already shedding them, weep herself and induce an attack of nerves or a luxurious headache, so that the discomfort of the whole household fell on Emma's shoulders, weighted with accusation: and at the end of it Mrs. Shardiloe would emerge radiant and handsome as before, drawing the family close in admiring tenderness, proving once more (as it never needed to be proved) that she was the source of all their well-being, their powerful nucleus, their center.

In spite of her temperament, or perhaps because of it, Susan Shardiloe could be excellent company when she chose. All she asked was an audience, and if that audience, when the good-humored fit was on her, was no more than her mother or even Bessie in the kitchen, the performance did not deteriorate. She would confide, and laugh, and remember small anecdotes from the rich rough and tumble of her music-hall past, repeat conversations with broad mimicry of voice and gesture, or tell stories of her struggling youth to bring tears to one's eyes. All she asked was response, appreciation; and these rarely failed her. At an outing or a party she was the best company in the world, provided she was acknowledged center of it; she could make the stupidest parlor game exciting, and could turn a day's shopping into a boisterous adventure. But once let the audience fail, once let the attention wander or the eyes betray apathy, and she was punctured, finished. She would break off, turn silent and moody; and, if no better opportunity presented itself, recapture interest with a fit of nerves, a fainting spell, or a sudden grievance. Professionally, this weakness had had to be fought against tooth and nail, but even in the theater she was by no means proof against it; lack of enthusiasm produced a sort of panic in her, which in turn transformed itself into resentment; and this perhaps more than anything else had been her undoing, limiting her to the smaller music halls where she was known and loved, and where she could count on prolonged sentimental applause as an old favorite. In the theater it was never possible to punish the audience, to twist its tail if it would not respond, to reduce it to tears if it would not laugh, or scare it by lying prone on the sofa

with a headache and smelling salts. But at home she had power to do all these things, and frequently, and especially since her retirement, did not scruple to use it. Tom Shardiloe could be made to sulk or Bessie to cry, and Emma could be touched off like a fuse into tears or a tantrum.

It was as audience that Miss Fairey was chiefly valuable to Mrs. Shardiloe, though she had other uses. She ranked as an old and trusted friend, but she was both less and more than this, performing services which no equal relationship would have asked and accepting treatment which few friends would have tolerated. She had known Mrs. Shardiloe for many years; ever since, in fact, they had been girls and next-door neighbors on Lavender Hill, more than twenty-five years ago now. Susan Hignett, as she was then, had been making her first appearance in South London pantomime, and Nellie Fairey, on the point of being apprenticed to the millinery trade, had been proud to make friends with the pretty, self-conscious creature. She had admired her soft hair and dazzling complexion, her big white teeth, which showed so readily under the short upper lip, her facile singing voice and vital spirits; and she had acted as eager chorus to Susan's ambitions. Later on Miss Fairey had gone to a straw-hat factory in Luton, and they had lost touch; but in their middle thirties, when Miss Fairey was back in London looking after an invalid mother, she had nerved herself to seek out her old friend in the theater, and their intimacy had been resumed on the old footing. Miss Fairey had given up business and had leisure to be fascinated, and now, after ten years of running in and out of the house on Brixton Hill, had almost achieved the standing of a near relation. A poor relation, of course, that went without saying, but eager and serviceable. Hardly a day passed but she let herself in at the back door and made herself useful; it was as if she drew life from the Shardiloes, sucked some strange satisfaction from the unpaid service which habit, like a drug, had made necessary; and when she went home to her ailing mother it was with the Shardiloes' sayings and doings, their friends, their food, their house, their clothes and their grandeur that she regaled her. To the children she was Aunt Nellie, the person who did most of the mending and ran most of the errands; who spent evenings with boxes of gauze and straw and artificial flowers, making hats for their mother, and who skillfully stitched lace and velvet ribbon and Parma violets onto Grandma's wire "shapes." She was as much a part of the household

as Grandma or Bessie, and, in their mother's absence, could be cheeked with impunity. "Oh, you *are* naughty children," she would say, scrubbing the end of her nose with a handkerchief if they had hurt her feelings; but she never really minded. The only taunts that wounded were Mrs. Shardiloe's, as the children well knew, seeing her red nose and swimming eyes after a row, and the way she bent her head and compressed her lips, bridling and sniffing.

On the night of the party Miss Fairey had put Emma to bed, as she often did when Bessie was busy in the kitchen, and had let her examine her brooch with the profile of Dickens carved on it, and the hinged steel filigree belt which she wore round her middle: but she would not be drawn into talk, and Emma had been disappointed. Usually Aunt Nellie had a fund of anecdote which was worth tapping; the hat factory at Luton which she had left long ago but which still, as the one portion of her life untinged by Mrs. Shardiloe, maintained an interesting and distinctive memory, was the source of many tales; and as a rule Emma had only to say: "Tell me some more about the girls in the workroom, Aunt Nellie," for Miss Fairey to be persuaded. "Well, what shall I tell you?" she would say, sitting down gingerly on the edge of the bed, but obviously amenable, "I've told you all I can remember about *them* already."

"Tell me about the one who put her eye in her mouth."

"Oh, her. Well, her name was Florrie, and she lost her eye as a little girl, playing tip-cat in the street. The 'cat' flew right in her eyeball and destroyed the sight, and she had a glass one, see?"

"Could you tell which it was?"

"You could. It stared." Miss Fairey's own eyes, intent and a little watery behind her glasses, would gaze awfully at Emma, preparing her for horror. "Her good eye would move, like this"—here Miss Fairey would open her lids unnaturally wide and turn the eyeballs dramatically in their sockets—"but the glass eye would stare straight at you, like this." Here Miss Fairey would cover one eye with her hand and fix the other glassily on Emma.

"Tell what she used to do with it, Aunt Nellie."

"She used," Miss Fairey would say, dropping her voice, "she used to get it out with a hairpin, and put it down on the table, among the bonnets and flowers."

"Why did she do that, Aunt Nellie?"

"To make the other girls scream. It did, too. Well, one day the

forewoman came in all of a sudden, and Florrie had got her eye out on the table and was pretending to stick a needle into it. There wasn't time to put it back, so what do you think she did?"

Emma, convulsed, would cover her mouth with both hands.

"She popped it in her mouth. Just like a plum. Went on sewing with her head down, and her eye sticking out in her cheek, for all the world like a peppermint . . ."

But tonight there had been no story. Aunt Nellie had had on her best dress of maroon taffeta, and had not even sat down for fear of creasing it. She had been listening with one ear for Mrs. Shardiloe's voice, and when finally she heard her own name being called had hurried Emma into bed and turned out the gas, and rustled downstairs with her chains and charms tinkling.

The sound of singing woke Emma out of a doze. She had not meant to sleep, but the bed was warm, and after her cold vigil on the landing comfort had enveloped her like a dream. She had dozed off half in a sitting posture, but after a while had slid farther down into the familiar hollow of the feather bed, with her blankets about her ears and her face turned to the pillow. Now it was an effort to wake, but the persistent high notes of her mother's singing pricked her nerves, and she sat up in bed, her hair standing on end, and listened. So the party was still going on. It seemed as though she had been asleep a long time; almost, indeed, as if it were time to get up; but there they were, still at it, and her mother was singing "Come Into the Garden, Maud." A sudden resolution took hold of her and she got quickly out of bed. On the landing she hesitated, and then, holding up her nightgown with one hand, stole quickly downstairs, looking neither to right nor left because of the darkness, and pausing to breathe only when she reached the first landing, where the gas jet, turned low, made a soft moon of light within its china globe, saving her from panic. On this landing her feet, which had shrunk from the cold oil-cloth of the upper story, came gratefully on carpet. She glanced swiftly at the closed linen closet and away again. Beside it the lavatory door gaped darkly ajar, and she could hear the cistern whispering. In the back bedroom Grandma's bed springs creaked, and Emma crept down hurriedly to the hall. Here everything was reassuring; the light burning clearly above the umbrella stand, the faint fragrance of Mr. Morton's cigar hanging on the air, her mother's voice soaring exul-

tantly over the flourishing piano, working up professionally to the end of her song. Without stopping to lose courage Emma tiptoed to the door of the drawing room, took the china knob in both hands and turned it. Her mother took her final note as she came into the room.

Mrs. Shardiloe saw Emma at once, and the wide singer's smile which framed her last crescendo faltered for an instant and then stretched again mechanically. Tom Shardiloe pounded his last chords without raising his eyes, and then, as his wife bit off her voice in platform style, tossing her head, looked up, and he too saw Emma. Everybody clapped, and Mr. Morton, holding his long cigar carefully in his teeth, beat the arm of his chair and cried: "Bravo!" Then he and Miss Fairey and one of the Mr. Godfreys caught sight of the child hesitating and blinking in the doorway, and exclaimed together: Mr. Morton benevolently, Mr. Godfrey politely, and Miss Fairey in genuine alarm.

"Well, *well*, who's here?"

"If it isn't Emmie!"

"Good gracious, whatever is the matter?"

Emma, whose eyes had been averted from her mother's, drew a breath of relief. It was going to be all right. She had seen the slight hiatus in that triumphant smile and for a moment had regretted her enterprise; but now Mr. Morton was coming to her rescue; the probability of trouble diminished; her mother's raised eyebrows were coming down again.

"Whatever is the matter, child?" said Mrs. Shardiloe, advancing with a sailing motion over the carpet and laying her hand on Emma's head. "Why aren't you in bed and asleep?"

"I couldn't sleep, Mom; 'n' I wanted a drink of water."

"What nonsense," said her mother fondly, stroking the tousled head and smiling down at her. She was aware that the action was a graceful one, and this made her kind. She turned to Miss Fairey, standing apprehensively behind her.

"Nellie, go and get the child a drink of water. And a shawl," she added. She guided Emma to the hearthrug with a gentle push. "You'll catch your death of cold."

Freed from her mother's hand Emma sidled shyly to Mr. Morton. He put out a hand to receive her, and she leaned against his knee, sniffing his cigar smoke. A delicious happiness invaded her. Lily, she saw, was no longer there; she could enjoy the freakish adventure without rivalry. The room was warm and softly lit and altogether en-

chanting; everyone looked kind. The two Miss Godfreys nodded encouragingly from the sofa, and their brothers, those neat and pleasant little men, glanced at one another and smiled. Her mother came and leaned her elbow on the mantelpiece, shaking her head over the escapade, but evidently not angry. She was looking her splendid best, and Emma gazed at her with admiration. She was wearing the striped rose silk which set off her fairness; a bunch of sham roses nestled in her belt and her bosom was festooned with a trimming of cream-colored lace. She poised herself artfully against the mantelpiece, the firm curves of bust and hip, of ribboned sleeves and smoothly corseted waist carrying the unwrinkled silk of the bright dress flowingly. Mr. Morton and she exchanged smiling glances over Emma's head. There was a conspiracy of indulgence in her favor.

"Do you know what time it is, you naughty girl?" said her mother.

Emma looked at the gold clock on the mantelpiece, the one she loved, with the minstrel playing a guitar on a golden crag under a glass shade; but though she frowned attentively the metal face told her nothing, for she could not tell the time.

"It's twenty-past eleven," said Mrs. Shardiloe reprovingly, and added, as someone fumbled at the doorknob, "I hope to goodness you didn't wake Grandma as you came down."

It was Miss Fairey, however, who came in, with a glass of milk and an orange on a plate, and a shawl over her arm. She had brought Emma's slippers, too, and a safety pin for securing the shawl across her chest. Emma was wrapped up and set on a stool against Mr. Morton's knee to eat her illicit supper.

"I know what you want with that," said Mr. Morton in her ear as she turned the orange in her hands, looking for the softest place to bite; "you make a nice little hole with your teeth and I'll magic it for you."

Emma obediently bent her head over the fruit and Mr. Morton took a lump of sugar from the saucer of his empty coffee cup on the floor beside him and dropped it in a fold of Emma's shawl.

"It's at the back of your neck," he said; and there, sure enough, when she put up her hand to feel, was a magic cube of sugar. Solemn with delight, she pushed it through the hole in the peel, pressing it into the pulpy body of the fruit with her thumb and began to suck, her dark eyes fixed intently on Mr. Morton. If only the party would go on again, if only her mother would go back to the piano and sing, she would have Mr. Morton to herself. Anxious for attention, she was yet

aware that her mother's notice was dangerous, and might at any moment bring dismissal. Her father, still at the piano, was idly playing one chord after another, beginning an air with one hand and then changing it to a different one, his head on one side, absently admiring the effect; and Mr. Cyril Godfrey and Miss Fairey were turning over her mother's songs, whispering together. If only her mother would go back and sing again, she would be allowed to stay; but Mrs. Shardiloe went on leaning against the mantelpiece, glancing about the room, and every now and then turning her head to look at Mr. Morton and her daughter. Emma was aware of her gaze, but dared not look up. She sucked away at her orange, staring at the carpet.

Suddenly she thought of a private magic she had often practiced with success, and closed her eyes to concentrate. She had discovered that if you repeated over and over to yourself what you wanted a person to do, they very often did it. If they didn't, you gave it up and thought of something else; but sometimes it worked so well that it was almost frightening. She had discovered this secret at school, during arithmetic, when she was particularly anxious to avoid Miss Wetherby's eye. All you did, when the time came for Miss Wetherby to demand the answer to a sum, was to bend your head attentively over your exercise book and whisper: "Ask Belle Taylor, ask Belle Taylor," silently and fervently. The remarkable thing was that Miss Wetherby sometimes *did* ask Belle Taylor, or whoever you had chosen, or, if she did not, at least dropped on somebody on the other side of the room, so that you were spared, and could breathe again, and the magic might fairly be said to have worked halfway. Pleased with her discovery Emma had tried it on a great many people with varying success, and in her own mind was convinced that she possessed an important secret. Bessie, so far, had been the most responsive subject. When she was sitting in the kitchen, as she often did, watching Bessie at work, she would experiment on her just for the fun of it, to see if she would do what she wanted. She would will Bessie to poke the fire or open the oven, and as often as not Bessie would drop what she was doing and obey these unspoken commands, suddenly observing that the fire in the range was sluggish, or with a cry of dismay remembering the rice pudding. Sometimes she noticed Emma's look of triumph, and would cry: "What are you staring at, you little image?"—but she had no notion that she was Emma's slave of the lamp, and Emma did not enlighten her. Indeed, it was part of Emma's

belief that if she told the secret the power would instantly vanish, and she attributed many of her recent failures to the fact that she had been weakly led to boast of her powers at school—a piece of folly she bitterly regretted. She had surprised Lily and her favorites sitting in the cloakroom one morning during recess, their heads together, and had been sharply told to go away because they were talking secrets. She had violently wished to share those secrets, but they had been derisive and superior, telling her that she was only a baby, and to run away and play, and other humiliating suggestions; until finally Emma had said that she had a secret, too, and it was much better than theirs because it was a magic one, and really worked, and you could do anything you liked by it. “Go on!” Lily had said, and the others had cried: “You never!”—but they had been curious nonetheless, and had finally agreed to say what they had been talking about if Emma would tell her magic secret and demonstrate its efficacy.

“Well, then, I can make anybody do what I want by saying a spell,” Emma had said, making the process sound a little grander than it really was, and at the same time not giving it away entirely.

“Make me stand on my head, then,” Dolly Webster had said instantly, bracing herself against the boot cupboard.

“Silly, I mean when they don’t know,” said Emma, losing ground.

“Make Miss Bannister stand on her head, then, when she comes into class.”

“I could if I wanted.”

“Do it, then.”

“I don’t want.”

“There! You can’t. I knew you couldn’t.”

Emma, struggling against tears, had tried to think of a more practicable suggestion.

“I could make her blow her nose as soon as she came in.”

“She’s always blowing her nose. She’s got catarrh.”

“Make her take her knickers off and we’ll believe you,” said Dulcie Price, hoping against her better judgment that Emma might be speaking the truth.

Finally they had agreed, though somewhat scornfully, that if Emma could make Miss Bannister, who was known to have a running cold, open the window as soon as she came into the room, they would admit that her magic had something in it, though not much.

Accordingly, when Miss Bannister came in after recess to take Holy

Scripture, in which Emma's class and that if the older girls combined, Emma had not only willed but prayed that Miss Bannister would be moved to open the window. But Miss Bannister, whose head was buzzing with catarrh and who suffered from chilblains, had looked apprehensively at the window and at once made one of the taller girls close a ventilator. Lily had tittered audibly and the others had grinned derisively over their shoulders, so that Emma, dropping tears of mortification on the page of her Old Testament, had had to console herself with the reflection that Miss Bannister, like her own mother, was one of those unpredictable people who worked by opposites.

From the beginning Emma had had no magic successes with her mother. So invariably did Mrs. Shardiloe do the exact opposite of what she was being willed to do that Emma had invented a special technique for dealing with her. This consisted of fiercely willing her to do the very opposite of what one wanted; and though it was by no means always successful, it at least produced better results than the more straightforward method.

She sucked her orange, frowning, and made an effort of will. "Send me to bed," she commanded her mother, "send me to bed, send me to bed." It was difficult to will such a thing with any fervor, for there was always the danger that this might not be one of her mother's contrary days, and that she would obey the spell as promptly as she usually shattered it. She was dangerous and uncertain. However, since direct magic usually had disastrous results in her mother's case there was nothing for it but to proceed with the reverse formula. Apparently intent on her orange, Emma silently exhorted her mother *not* to go back to the piano, *not* to sing, but to send her to bed immediately.

"How children do love to stay up late," said Miss Clarice Godfrey, the elder and better-looking of the sisters, considering Emma with her head on one side. "I was a terror myself when I was a kid. Never could get me to bed at all, hardly."

"I always think," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "that the whole secret of keeping one's youth is to get plenty of sleep. Now I always, to this day, go up to my room at two o'clock sharp, and lay down until four."

"Well, you can *now*," said Miss Clarice, "but you can't always have done it, Susan. What about twice-nightlies? What about re'arsals? Very nice if you can do it, but who can, in the profession? And touring. Look at the days you spend in the train, for one thing." Miss Godfrey,

on close inspection, looked her age, whereas Mrs. Shardiloe did not, and the insinuation was that they had once been contemporaries.

"There weren't so many twice-nightlies in those days," said the other Miss Godfrey tactlessly.

"Oh, naturally," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "I often had to do without it. But what I say is, you should always try to make up your sleep when you can. Why, sometimes for months on end I never got a proper night's rest, except on Sundays. All the more reason for taking it when you get the chance."

"Well, as I say," persisted Miss Clarice, "you can *now*."

There was an uncomfortable pause. Mrs. Shardiloe had retired from the variety stage three years before, and the fiction was carefully maintained that she had done so at the height of success, and only because she had come into her father's money; but the Godfreys knew, and Mr. Morton knew, that she had been slipping, and that her father's money had come in the nick of time. As it was, she had made an enviable exit at very nearly the right moment, and was better off than any of them; but they clearly remembered (more clearly even than Mrs. Shardiloe, who had a happy knack of forgetting humiliations) the ugly row there had been with the manager of the Clapham Grand, when he had put her last but one on the program and had refused her a better position, and the awful night at the Glasgow Pavilion when there had been catcalls from the gallery during her "Wedding Bells" number, and the curtain had had to come down in the middle of it because the audience was so impatient for Jolly John Nash.

"You're a sensible woman," said Mr. Morton soothingly, "and there isn't one of us, if I may say so, my dear, who wouldn't be glad to look as young as you do, even if we were half your age—which, unfortunately, we're not."

"Oh, go on," said Mrs. Shardiloe. The tension eased.

"You can't expect a child to see it like that, though," Mr. Morton went on, stroking the back of Emma's head; "when I was a little chap I used to climb out of the window at night and get up to all sorts of devilment. One time my dad fixed a calf-net over the bed to keep me in, but it wasn't any good. I got my first practice with knots and ropes on that calf-net. Started me off, you might say, though he didn't know it."

"Goodness, yes," said the elder Miss Godfrey, "it's in the blood. Our mother never knew what it was to get us kids off before midnight.

We always used to stay up until Father got home. Well, you know how noisy professional lodgings are as a rule. Doors banging and supper going on until one o'clock in the morning. It isn't reasonable to expect children to sleep as if nothing was going on."

"That's right," said the younger Miss Godfrey, "you can't expect it."

Miss Cora was not really a Godfrey at all, but she echoed the opinions of the others so faithfully that most people forgot this. She had joined the troupe several years ago, when one of the real Miss Godfreys had had a trapeze accident and then, surprisingly, married. She was an indifferent performer, but as all the skilled work of the act was done by the two brothers while the sisters in jeweled tights ran forward with upraised arms and triumphant cries at the conclusion of each figure, this was of no great importance: what did matter was that she was small, light and agile, and bore a noticeable resemblance to her supposed sister, having the short compact body, the rather broad nose and straight wide mouth which recur with such curious persistence in circus families.

"Well, I *do* expect it," said Mrs. Shardiloe, putting the toe of her pointed slipper on the fender and lifting her skirt slightly so that the bugles glittered; "this isn't a lodginghouse, and I'm not going to bring up my children as if it were. Lily, now, she's different. She's going on for fourteen, and I don't mind her staying up till ten o'clock once in a while. It gives the child confidence to be able to sing sometimes before grown-up people. But Emma's not strong. She's a naughty girl to come down at all, and she knows it."

Raising her eyes, Emma met her mother's severe glance and looked away. The magic was unavailing. Mrs. Shardiloe was clearly working herself up to a demonstration of authority, and only a miracle could save her. She leaned hard against Mr. Morton's knee and began to tear the flabby skin of the orange in pieces, searching the drained flesh for remnants of sugar.

"Come along, now," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "drink up your milk and don't waste time. You won't be fit to go to school in the morning."

Miss Fairey rustled across with the glass of milk and held it to Emma's lips. The child drank slowly, unwillingly, and as the glass tilted firmly upwards a trickle of milk ran down her chin and dripped on the woolen shawl. Miss Fairey hastily mopped it up with her handkerchief.

"Come along, now," she said briskly, "do as your mum tells you."

Mr. Morton stirred in his chair. A wreath of cigar smoke floated deliciously across Emma.

"I'll take her up, shall I?" he said. "Emma and I are great friends. She'll show me the way."

He stood up, and with a light powerful movement hoisted the child onto his shoulder. She looked down, delighted. If only this moment would last! Even as she enjoyed it her pleasure was clipped by the knowledge that in a very few minutes she would be back in the dark bedroom, alone, and Mr. Morton would be gone downstairs again, taking all warmth and joy with him. She clutched his thick hair with her hands, smiling.

"Mind her head!" said Miss Fairey anxiously as they went through the doorway. Mr. Morton put his free hand carefully in the small of Emma's back, and they went upstairs.

"Mr. Morton, will you stay and talk to me when I'm in bed?"

"I might, if you're a good girl and go to sleep at once."

"If I went to sleep I shouldn't be able to answer."

"Yes, you would. I'll send you a nice dream, and you can answer me in that."

"Can you really do that?"

"Of course."

Emma considered this, and decided that there was a catch in it somewhere. It would be better to stay awake.

They reached the first landing, and Grandma's door, which was ajar, closed cautiously.

"Hurry!" whispered Emma, "she's awake." There was something horrible about Grandma when she lurked like that behind half-open doors; and besides, Emma did not wish to share Mr. Morton's attention with Grandma's ailments. They mounted the second flight.

"Mr. Morton."

"Yes, love?"

"I have a dream sometimes when I'm awake."

"That's called daydreaming. Everybody does it."

"I don't think they do," said Emma, loosing Mr. Morton's neck reluctantly as he laid her on the bed. "Lily doesn't. It isn't dreaming, exactly; it's a feeling."

"Oh. I see."

"It frightens me."

"Why? What do you dream about?"

"I don't dream *about* anything. It comes when I'm in bed, only awake. If I sit up, it stops. Sometimes I call out."

"That's right," said Mr. Morton comfortably, "it can't hurt you." He thought her a fanciful child, and wondered dimly if she were unhappy. A queer little creature to be Susan's daughter; yet there seemed nothing of Tom Shardiloe in her. He cast his mind back to the years when he had known Susan in the theater. That chap in Manchester, perhaps? But then, nothing had come of it. At least, so far as he knew.

He drew the coverlet up to Emma's neck and stroked her cheek with a finger. Then he bent portentously over her and kissed her brow. His mustache smelled mysterious.

Hours later, it seemed, Emma was wakened by voices. She looked at the window; it was still dark; was it possible, after all this time, that they were only just leaving? Suddenly she remembered Mr. Morton, and got hurriedly out of bed. There might still be time to say good-by; he might even carry her upstairs again, and sit talking on the edge of the bed when the others went home. Without pausing to reflect further she flew downstairs toward the voices in the hall, only to stop abruptly half-way down the last flight when their tone warned her that the visitors had gone, and that her mother and father and Grandma were in the middle of a row.

"I don't know what I've done to deserve it," Grandma was wailing, "you know 'ow poorly I am, I 'ave to get up in the night . . ."

"Yes, but you don't have to come right downstairs in that filthy old shawl," Mrs. Shardiloe shouted, "just when everybody's going home, looking like an old scarecrow. And in your bed-socks, too. It's disgusting. Haven't you any pride?"

"A nice one you are to talk about pride," Mrs. Hignett retorted, "leaving your mother up there alone while you carry on with that row all night. What if I was took bad? You ought to be ashamed."

"Took bad? No such luck," said Mrs. Shardiloe bitterly, "you *ought* to be took bad, going on as you do. But it's me that suffers from it; you do it on purpose to upset me. Making an exhibition of yourself!"

"Ah," said Mrs. Hignett, "so that's it. I ought to be took bad, ought I? Well, I shan't be 'ere to trouble you much longer, any of you.

When I'm in my grave per'aps you'll be satisfied. Oh, you ungrateful girl! I don't know what I've *done* that God should punish me like this. I don't know what your father would say if 'e could 'ear you, *that* I don't."

"Oh, shut up," said Tom Shardiloe wearily. "Why do we have to have this every single time? Go to bed, Ma, and hold your noise."

"*Me* hold my noise!" shrieked the old woman. "Don't you dare speak to me like that, Tom Shardiloe! You're as bad as she is. Six of one and 'alf a dozen of the other."

She turned her back on them in disgust and grasped the stair rail, preparing to make the slow and laborious ascent, groaning at every step, which was her final answer in all such arguments, the accusing and terrible demonstration of age and infirmity. At this unlucky moment she caught sight of Emma.

"There!" she cried triumphantly, pointing a quavering forefinger at the figure on the landing, "a nice 'ouse *this* is—caterwauling all night and children out of their beds at one o'clock in the morning. You'll 'ave the neighbors complaining, my word you will! A disorderly 'ouse! My lor', I don't know what your father would 'ave to say if 'e knew!" She hopped up the stairs toward Emma like an old bogey.

Mrs. Shardiloe darted up past her and caught Emma by the arm, breathing loudly. She shook her with such violence that the child cried out in alarm and clung to the banisters.

"How *dare* you!" she cried, "how *dare* you! What are you thinking of? Haven't I had trouble enough with you already? Oh, this is the last straw!" And she began to cry and to shake Emma again at the same time.

"Leave her be," said her husband sharply. "Have done, both of you. I'm fed up with it," and he hunched his shoulders and went crossly into the dining room. But Mrs. Shardiloe had found a vent for exasperation, and delivered several resounding slaps on the side of Emma's head before she could bring herself to loosen her grasp. "Take *that*," she said, "and *that*," as Emma dodged, howling. Then she fell back against the banisters, sobbing noisily, and Emma, still roaring at the top of her voice, escaped to her own room.

She cried herself to sleep under the blankets, and passed the rest of the night in suffocating dreams. In the early morning physical uneasiness disturbed her. Her head ached and she was unnaturally thirsty, oppressed by a vague discomfort which might mean biliousness. It

was not yet light and nobody was stirring. She thought of the rim of soot inside the washstand jug and determined to go downstairs for a drink of water.

This time she put on her thick flannel dressing gown and slippers and proceeded cautiously. She was not going to risk a second encounter with her mother, but at this hour she was comparatively safe. It could not be more than seven o'clock. There was no sound of Bessie.

On the first landing she hesitated, but rejected the idea of the bathroom tap as dangerous. The pipes made a noise, and Grandma was a perilously light sleeper. She decided to risk meeting Bessie and get her drink in the kitchen. The drawing-room door, however, caught her eye as she reached the hall, stirring vague curiosity. She turned the knob and went into the stuffy gloom.

The room was dark; the fumes of dead cigars and stale glasses hung stagnantly on the atmosphere, pierced by the bitter flavor of potted ferns. She groped her way to the window, pulled back the curtains and let up the Venetian blind. The ghost of last night's party still, in crumpled cushions and dirty glasses and cups, pervaded the room. In the half light she discerned a litter of objects on the little mother-of-pearl table beside which Mr. Morton had sat, and went over to examine it; his coffee cup, the butts of two cigars on a small brass tray, the strong-smelling remains of her own orange, and a thin-stemmed glass half-full of some dark liquid.

She picked up the glass and sniffed. The stuff smelt sweet and strong, and she identified it, from a sip she had had one Christmas a long time ago, as her father's port. She tasted it, hiccuping slightly with disgust; nevertheless, since it was Mr. Morton's, and forbidden, she told herself that she liked it, and stood turning the wineglass thoughtfully in her fingers.

Suddenly a door banged down below, and Bessie attacked the kitchen range with a poker, raking and rattling with elemental spite. Emma judged from the violence of the noise that Bessie was in one of her moods, and reluctantly gave up the idea of going down to the kitchen. Early morning sometimes made Bessie harsh and unreliable; she was capable of sending one upstairs with audible scolding, which, after the angry tumult of last night, was not to be thought of. Instead, Emma went back to her room, still carrying the wineglass, and stood for some time looking irresolutely out of the window.

She sipped again at the port, and this time regretfully decided that

it was nasty. She set the glass down on the window sill and pressed her cold hands against her brow. Would the headache be bad enough to save her from going to school? She had had a long history of petty ailments, and had missed school so often that she had come to regard staying at home as her special privilege, the one advantage by which she scored over Lily. She wandered to the dressing table to examine her face in the mirror, and standing on tiptoe beheld a ghostly reflection, blotched and pallid in the mean grayness of the wintry morning.

Staring thus in the glass, she heard the first sounds of Bessie coming upstairs with the hot water. She would pause to set down Mr. Shardinloe's shaving jug, and then proceed to the second floor to call the children. Intent on invalidism, Emma darted to the bed. Then, remembering the glass of port, she flew back to the window, measuring Bessie's advance against her chance of concealment. There was no time to open the wardrobe, where she had hidden so many things in the past; the lock was stiff, and Bessie was already setting down the brass cans at the door. She hurried to the washstand, hesitated a moment between soap dish and ewer, and with sudden inspiration threw the wine in the capacious rose-patterned chamber pot on the lower deck. Then she skipped back to bed, and as Bessie grasped the doorknob, thrust the empty glass well under the blankets.

Chapter II

AT NOON THE FOLLOWING DAY MISS FAIREY LET herself in as usual by the back door. She was a little flustered, for a cab had been coming out of the front gate as she turned to go in, and the person inside it had looked uncommonly like the doctor; though, between skirting the mud and managing her umbrella, she could not be sure. A visit from Dr. Ashe could mean a number of things; Mrs. Shardiloe might be having an attack of nerves, or Grandma a stroke; in any case, she, Miss Fairey, would be urgently needed, and of the greatest importance.

She stood her dripping umbrella in the scullery sink and sat down to a jar of homemade chutney she had brought as a present. She removed her cape and galoshes and peeled off her sodden gloves, blowing into the fingers in an ineffectual attempt to restore their shape, before briskly carrying them by their wrists into the kitchen.

Bessie was crouching in front of the range with the oven door open, wrapping a hot brick in flannel. She looked up when she heard Miss Fairey and gave a theatrical start. Bessie was enjoying herself that morning, not allowing even the smallest crumbs of drama to elude her.

"Oh, miss, it's you," said Bessie, once more swaddling the brick, "you did give me a turn."

"Good morning, Bessie. Was that Dr. Ashe I passed in the drive?"

"Yes, miss. Would you believe it? Miss Emma's took very bad."

"Emma? Good gracious, whatever's the matter?"

Bessie glanced over her shoulder and dropped her voice.

"They don't know," she said; "something bad, it looks like." She stood up, and coming very close to Miss Fairey, added in a relishing whisper: "There was blood in her you-know-what this morning."

Miss Fairey drew back distastefully. "Really, Bessie," she said, in a tone of reproof. Then, arranging her gloves fastidiously on the airing rack over the range, "What does Mrs. Shardiloe think it is?"

"She don't know what to think, miss. In a proper state she is, and Mrs. Ignett as well. The child was quiet like when I went to call 'er,

said she 'ad a 'eadache and was goin' to ask orf from school. Well, I didn't take no notice at first, but when I come to empty the thingummy I seen there was something wrong. 'What's this?' I said. 'Oh, Bessie,' she said, 'I 'ad to get up in the night,' she said, 'I 'ad a terrible pain.' 'I can see you been up,' I said, 'I'm not blind,' and I went straight down and told the mistress. 'It's my belief,' I told 'er, 'it's kidneys.' Got straight up, she did, and went to see for 'erself. Sent the master out for Dr. Ashe before 'e'd swallered 'is breakfast."

"Tcah!" said Miss Fairey. "Give me that brick, Bessie. I'll take it up myself. Has Mrs. Shardiloe had some tea?"

"No, miss; she won't touch nothing."

"Well, make a pot now. Make it nice and strong and bring it upstairs on a tray. We must all keep calm, you know, whatever it is."

She received the wrapped brick with an air of deadly efficiency and bustled out of the kitchen. Bessie, robbed of her mission, trailed wistfully after her.

"She's vomited, too," she called after Miss Fairey's skirts as they disappeared up the stairway, "thrown up good and proper." Then she turned back resignedly to the kitchen and put on the kettle.

In Emma's bedroom Mrs. Shardiloe, in a pink tea gown, was sitting beside a new and smoking fire.

"Oh, Nellie," she said, "oh, Nellie!" She appeared to have been crying.

"There, my dear," said Miss Fairey, giving her a peck on the cheek, "it'll be all right"—implying, though she did not say so, "now *I* have come."

She carried the hot brick to the bed and inserted it carefully between the blankets, feeling the child's cold feet with her hand and chafing them lightly. Emma warily opened her eyes and closed them again.

"Now," said Miss Fairey, going back to the fire and standing authoritatively over Mrs. Shardiloe, "tell me all about it. What does the doctor say?"

Mrs. Shardiloe sighed.

"He doesn't know, Nellie. Doctors never say what they really think, do they? It must be something bad, I'm afraid. Bessie's cousin's wife had the same thing, she says, last summer. They buried her in fortnight." She put a graceful hand up to her face and the corners of her mouth quivered. "And to think," she wailed, "to think that only last

night I was severe with her! This is my punishment. Oh yes, it is, Nellie; I know I was in the wrong. If she's spared I'll never lay a finger on her again. I swear it."

Emma listened to the conversation with interest. She was, to tell the truth, a little scared, but the very real bilious attack from which she was suffering saved her from any serious feeling of guilt. After all, she had been sick twice, and though she was now enjoying a sensation of weak relief there might very well be something grave the matter. She hoped there was. This was God's proportioned answer to her partial prayer; if she had said Amen He might have obliged her entirely.

As it turned out, this sudden illness was far more satisfactory. Her mother was thoroughly frightened, Lily had been packed off to school after the sketchiest of breakfasts, and Dr. Ashe had arrived in the middle of the morning. He had given her something to drink from a medicine glass, and had ordered a fire in her bedroom, a hot brick for the feet, and absolute quiet. The mysterious importance of the sickroom had deliciously enfolded her.

She had had a few moments of alarm when her less respectable symptoms had come under discussion. At first she had thought that the discovery of her escapade with the wine glass was the cause of their whispering—and held her breath; but Dr. Ashe had shaken his head doubtfully, jingling his seals, and she had caught the puzzling phrase, "blood in the urine." She had lain still then, waiting for further developments, and when it transpired that it was her random action with the dregs of Mr. Morton's port that had produced best evidence of her illness, had said nothing.

It was unlikely that they would ever discover the glass. When Bessie had gone downstairs after her initial discovery she had hidden it in a private place which she had found long ago—a dark cavity full of pipes and bits of mortar which she and Lily called "the secret passage." The door to this—really a movable panel about two feet high—was situated behind the washstand, and the children had never noticed it until the preceding winter, when the pipes had burst, and the plumber, who apparently knew all about it, had moved the washstand, lifted out the panel, and crawled into the cavern with a bag of tools and a candle. Emma had never explored this passage because it was dark, and Lily had never explored it because it was dirty; indeed, Lily had never been particularly interested; her imagination ran in more sophisticated chan-

nels. So the secret passage had remained more or less Emma's property, and she had used it once or twice as a cache in moments of emergency.

As the day wore on and her sickness subsided, she became increasingly pleased with her situation. Her mother and Aunt Nellie invigilated in turn in the sickroom, and once or twice her father came up to look at her. Grandma and Lily, to her disappointment, were not admitted; but she had the pleasure of hearing whispered inquiries and reports exchanged outside the door. After tea Dr. Ashe called for the second time, and, since the alarming symptoms of the morning had not reappeared, expressed his satisfaction with the results of his treatment, prescribed four to five days in bed on a milk diet, and left a bottle of medicine.

Nothing that Emma could have imagined would have suited her better. From being the ill-starred ugly duckling of the family she had, by the merest accident, become its swan, and like a swan remained discreetly mute. Her conscience troubled her scarcely at all, for after the first few hours her pantomime of sickness had convinced even herself, so that she fell naturally and pleasantly into a docile languor. Only at night, when she was sometimes wakeful, did pictures of hell-fire, of the lake of fire and brimstone in which all liars had their portion, and which Grandma had often described with a wealth of detail suggesting firsthand experience, briefly torment her; but these gloomy apprehensions vanished with morning, when Bessie stole softly in to light the fire, and her mother came up to make her first inquiry.

"And how is my darling this morning?"

"Oh . . . tired, Mom. I was awake for hours."

"Poor Em! Dr. Ashe shall give you something nice to make you sleep. Could you doze off again now, d'you think, while Mother gets dressed?"

"I'll try, Mom."

"There's a good child." And Mrs. Shardiloe in her trailing wrapper would tiptoe out again, and Emma, lulled by the thought of Lily having to get up and go to school, would drowse contentedly into the depths of her warm pillows.

Aunt Nellie read to her by the hour in the afternoons, sitting with a little red-shaded lamp beside her and her feet on the fender. They had begun with fairy tales and proceeded to *Oliver Twist*, which Emma found enthralling. She listened with half-shut eyes, her hands lying idle on the coverlet, while Aunt Nellie's voice rose and fell and

her spectacles meekly reflected the moving firelight. Once or twice, hypnotized by Aunt Nellie's voice and the red flower of the lamp, Emma experienced that queer sensation which she called "the feeling," and which she had once tried to describe to Mr. Morton. It was the oddest thing; the room and the lamp would recede to an immense distance, while Aunt Nellie's voice would grow queerly remote, and her own limbs seem monstrously big and unwieldy, as though they were made of cotton-wool and did not belong to her. It was a frightening feeling, for there was no means of knowing where it would stop. If she roused, making a deliberate movement, she could retrieve herself; if not, the feeling carried her away with increasing speed, like a train running backwards down a gradient, so that reality rushed dangerously into the distance, and she had to clutch at its flying fringes before it was too late. What the destination of that nightmare rush might be she had no idea; it was too horrible ever to be allowed to finish its course; and she always, as soon as it began, checked its progress with an effort of will, as one sometimes can a bad dream, waking with relief to the shadows in settled perspective, and Aunt Nellie's voice murmuring in gentle monotony as before.

On the third afternoon Mr. Morton paid her a visit. He was appearing that week at a West End music hall, and having achieved a reasonable place on the bill was in excellent spirits. He brought Emma a bunch of violets framed in ivy leaves, and several pocket tricks—a branch of conjuring of which he was exceedingly fond, and which he performed with marvelous precision and delicacy. He made coins disappear, and produced them again from his mouth and the tips of Emma's ears; he mystified her with a cigar case in which the cigars were constantly changing their numbers or disappearing; and he did some baffling things with a length of blind cord and three or four brass rings. Best of all, he taught her some simple magic. He showed her how to tie a bow in the space of a second, with a movement of the fingers too rapid and simple for the eye to follow; and how to palm a halfpenny, producing it again at will between thumb and finger.

Enchanted, Emma sat up in bed and followed her lesson. Mr. Morton's fine hands, from which an object could melt under your very eyes, were extended over the counterpane. A penny appeared between his fingers. Now it was gone. He stroked the air, and it budded at the tip of his hand. Another pass, and it was nowhere. Then Emma would find it resting under her pillow.

"Let *me!* Let *me!*" she cried, feverishly snatching the penny. She moved her hands randomly about, but the penny remained solid.

"I'll do it again," said Mr. Morton, "only you must watch carefully this time."

"I *am* watching."

"Yes, but watch what I'm really doing, not what you think I'm doing. A magician always makes people pay attention to the movements that don't matter. That's what we call misdirection. Now you pay attention to the movements that *do* matter. I'll do them very slowly."

Once more the penny disappeared, but this time Mr. Morton turned his hand with the palm toward her, and she saw the coin held in position against the flesh at the base of the thumb. Then, dropping his wrist, he relaxed the tension, and the penny at once fell obediently into his fingers.

"Now you try. Wait a minute, let me see your little paws."

Emma presented them, palms downward; he carefully turned them over.

"M'm," he said, "good hands. Long fingers, sensitive, supple. When they're a little bigger there's lots of tricks they ought to be able to do."

Emma bent over her hands and studied them with interest. They looked much as usual, she thought; a little cleaner, perhaps, from being so long in bed.

"I can't make them any bigger, Mr. Morton."

"You can't, except by eating your porridge and growing into a big girl. I'll tell you what you *can* do, though. You can put a little honey and lemon on them every night when you go to bed. The skin's good, but they're a little chapped on the backs. An illusionist's hands have to be absolutely smooth, as smooth as satin. You can't do too much for your hands."

The afternoon passed in glowing intimacy between child and magician. When the light failed Mr. Morton brought the little red-shaded lamp to the bedside, and they sat together in its circle of colored warmth. The table, cleared of its medicine bottles, became a stage, and Emma's bed a theater.

She studied the flimsy program he had brought her. "Majo the Magnificent," she read, "the Marvelous Magician." And there he was, alive and real, sitting beside her.

"Mr. Morton, are you really a magician?"

"Of course. What else do you suppose?"

"I mean, are you the same as magicians in fairy stories? You couldn't turn yourself into a mouse, now, could you?"

Mr. Morton laughed.

"No. But then neither could they. That's only in stories."

"Aren't they true, then?"

Mr. Morton hesitated. He had a conservative reluctance to disturb a child's faith in anything that was pretty to believe, but on the subject of magic professional pride had also to be reckoned with. After all, what was so wonderful about magic if there was no skill in it? The hardly won cunning of the hands was more marvelous than the effortless metamorphosis of Puss in Boots.

"They're very pretty stories," he said cautiously, "but laid on a bit thick, you know. There have always been magicians, but they were only chaps like me, I dare say. Cleverer, perhaps," he conceded, "probably much cleverer."

Emma picked up one of the brass rings and considered it.

"Can you cast spells?"

"No. No more could they."

"Why did people think they could, then?"

"Well, people will believe anything if they want to. If I'd told you that trick with the pennies was real magic you'd have believed me, wouldn't you? It's a good explanation if you don't know how a thing's done. That's why you must keep those tricks a secret, and never tell anybody. A thing stops being magic when you give it away."

"Yes, I know," said Emma, thinking of her private spell.

"Then you promise not to tell anyone?"

"I promise. Cross my heart."

She lay back against the pillows, dreamily thinking. If magic were not true, it was a pity; but wasn't it almost as good to be a party to the secret? Better, even? She thought scornfully of the simple fairy tales on which Aunt Nellie had nourished her. From now on she would not believe them, but she would not say why. That was a secret she shared with Mr. Morton; the charm of superior knowledge outweighed disillusion.

The following days, however, were flat and dull. On the second morning after Mr. Morton's visit-she was allowed to get up, though not to come downstairs. She spent the morning alone and unprofitably in her room. Convalescence, she found, was less interesting than

illness. The celebrity she had so much enjoyed was slipping from her. Aunt Nellie no longer came to read aloud, and even her mother's visits were perfunctory. Only Bessie maintained a flattering interest in her condition, on account of her cousin's wife who had been buried in the summer; but Bessie, when she made the bed or brought up trays, was always in a hurry, and the doorbell usually put an end to conversation. Little by little Emma's sickroom ceased to be a nucleus of importance, and became a prison; she found herself listening enviously to the sounds of the house. Footsteps on the stairs, doors opening and closing, the sound of her mother's voice or Lily's practicing, filled her with a sort of empty and fretful nostalgia.

On the afternoon of Emma's first day out of bed Mrs. Shardiloe, to make matters worse, went on a shopping jaunt to Regent Street with Miss Faurey. She came up after lunch in her outdoor clothes, splendid in furs, with a bunch of violets pinned on her muff and a hat trimmed with ermine, to kiss Emma good-by. She smelt of flowers, furs and Jockey Club. They were going to the theater afterward, she said, and would not be back till late. Emma must keep very warm and quiet, and Bessie would put her to bed. If she wanted anything, she had only to call; Grandma was in her room and would surely hear her.

"Can't Father come up and read to me?" said Emma, holding on to the tails of her mother's fur.

"No, dear. He's out. He's going to meet us at the theater."

"Lily, then?" Even Lily, stuck-up though she was, would be better than nothing.

"Lily's gone to her dancing class. You must play by yourself, there's a good girl. You've got your fairy book, and Pilly; what more do you want?"

"I'm tired of Pilly." She gave the doll a distasteful push with her foot.

"Nonsense. You ought to be glad to stay in by the fire on such a cold afternoon. Leave go my tails. Your Aunt Nellie's waiting." And Mrs. Shardiloe rustled off, buttoning her gloves.

Emma sat disconsolately for some time by the fire, trying to think of something that she wanted to do. Nothing presented itself. At last she decided to inspect the wineglass she had hidden; so far nobody seemed to have missed it, but it might be as well to wash and return it to the dining room, which she could easily do without encountering Bessie.

She moved the washstand away from the wall and lifted out the loose panel. The cavern smelt cold and dusty. She squatted on her haunches and peered in. The glass had been hidden well to one side, and she would have to feel for it, putting her hand round the corner into that pregnant darkness. She hesitated. Who knew, after all, what inhabited the secret passage, lying grimly in wait for the hands of little girls? She got up and fetched the candle and matches from the bedside.

The small flame bent and fluttered uneasily when she thrust her arm through the doorway. The place was draughty. Gathering strength, however, it illumined the passage in sudden and reassuring clarity, showing it to be larger and less alarming than she had supposed. To the right, where she had hidden the glass, it ran only a few feet, ending abruptly in a brick wall, at the base of which the pipes took a downward plunge through a bed of dust and mortar. To the left it seemed to extend indefinitely, and the candlelight was eventually quenched in shadow. Lured by this discovery she decided to explore. She set down the candle on the floor of the passage and crawled in after it. There was ample room to travel on hands and knees, and she proceeded cautiously, moving the candle forward step by step, gathering a chilly dust on hands and stockings. Twice she was startled by noises inside the pipes, and held her breath. They spoke in whispers and far-off clanking echoes, which began and ceased abruptly; and at first Emma, who did not connect these sounds with Bessie's operations at the kitchen sink, felt some alarm; but the noises were apparently harmless, and after the second chorus she ignored them.

Ahead, as she proceeded, a chink of light became visible, thrown upward from the floor. She approached it slowly. The spoke of brightness dwindled and vanished as she drew near with her candle, but the chink in the floor was easily found, an uneven joint looking straight down into daylight. She placed her candle carefully beyond it and put her eye to the cranny. A thin draught struck her on the cheek, making her blink, but the unexpectedness of what she saw held her motionless. She was looking directly down into Grandma's room from a point close to the window.

She could see very little—a fold of long red curtain, a bit of floor, and the foot of a bamboo table supporting a fern—but it was enough to identify. She was above a point between pelmet and outside wall, about a foot and a half from the center of the window.

As she looked, there came from below a dry creak of upholstery, and Grandma grunted. She was padding slowly across the room, grunting as she came. Emma held her breath. The old woman did not approach the window as she hoped, but fidgeted about on the other side of the room, opening and shutting drawers and making impatient rustling noises at the dressing table. Eventually she seemed to find what she wanted, for she came back to her chair and creaked heavily down again. From the silence which followed, broken only by the snap of her spectacle case and the soft bounce of something which fell on the carpet, Emma judged that she had settled down to her crochet.

She could not have said why the discovery of this peephole excited her so deeply: an unholy joy mingled with her astonishment, and she tasted a sudden and trembling sense of power. To be able to spy, unseen, on the private moments of another person, even if that person were no more than her own grandmother, was intoxicating; it was like being possessed of a cloak of invisibility. The faint sounds of that hidden life in the room below, the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, the old woman's grunting, the rustle of her dress as she pulled up a length of thread from the ball on the floor, became important and mysterious; by virtue of the closed door of Grandma's room and her own invisibility these things took on a secret, forbidden flavor, dangerous and illicit.

When she had a little recovered from the shock of this discovery, she withdrew soundlessly, inch by inch, up the dark passage, moving awkwardly backwards over the dirty boards and lifting her candle after her. She wanted to think, to turn over the possibilities of this new possession in a place of safety, and consider how it might be used to the best advantage. It was an amazing treasure to have stumbled on at the beginning of a long and empty afternoon.

She had not been many minutes in her own room before she decided that the most interesting thing would be to drop something through the chink and frighten Grandma. The question was, what? It must be small, and if possible anonymous; the game would be up if the missile were identified. After some consideration she went to her satchel, which hung on a peg inside the wardrobe door, and took out some small stones. These pebbles were her equipment for a game called "five-stones" which had enjoyed a vogue among the younger children at school some months before, a simplified version of knucklebones in which Emma, with her long fingers and deftness of movement, had

been very proficient. She had not played or even thought of the game for a long time, and the stones had knocked about loosely at the bottom of her satchel among the dust, crumbs and fragments of slate pencil which habitually lodged there. She turned the stones over and polished them on her handkerchief. They had been selected from the dark gravel of the playground and were almost identical in size; and that size was eminently suitable for dropping on her grandmother.

After listening outside her door for a moment to make sure that no one stirred, Emma retired once more into the passage, carrying the saucer candlestick in her hand and the stones stuffed in the pocket of her pinafore. This time she traveled more cautiously, for Grandma's ears, though no longer sharp, had a way of detecting sounds when it was least convenient; careful listening at the chink, however, soon told her that all was well; Grandma's grunting maintained its placid rhythm.

With a quiver of eagerness Emma poised a stone over the hole, hesitated, and dropped it. It struck the floor with a sharp crack and bounced out of sight. Grandma's grunting stopped, but she made no movement; after a questioning pause she resumed her crochet. Disappointed and emboldened, Emma launched the second pebble. It made, if anything, a more startling percussion than the first, and Grandma's chair creaked irritably.

"Come in!" she called, "'oo is it?" No one replied, and grumbling under her breath she heaved herself out of her chair and went to the door. Emma heard the knob turn, and the old woman's smothered exclamation of annoyance. She had an almost unbearable desire to laugh, and crushed the hem of her pinafore over her mouth. She waited until Grandma had come back into the room and closed the door before loosing the third pebble.

This time Grandma was palpably alarmed. "Oh my," she said aloud, "oh my." Then she opened the door again and called urgently for Bessie, and a moment later Emma heard a vigorous creaking of the china bell-handle beside the fireplace and the far-off tinkling of the clapper in the kitchen passage. She beat a hasty retreat to her own room, torn between laughter and panic. She heard Bessie's cry of "Coming, mum!" as she pulled the washstand back into position, and an anxious murmur of voices as she extinguished the candle. The voices withdrew abruptly out of earshot. She judged that they had

both retired into Grandma's room, and must at this moment be trying to discover the cause of the disturbance.

She looked at her dusty hands and clothes in dismay. The knees of her black stockings and the toes of her shoes were gray with mortar, and her hands were filthy. Standing on tiptoe she reached her hair-brush out of a top drawer and carefully brushed her knees, then rubbed her shoes and hands on the underside of the hearthrug. This done, she sat down by the fire and industriously began to undress her wax-faced doll. She was thoughtfully untying the tapes of Pilly's chemise when Bessie came running upstairs and burst the door open.

"Oh," said Bessie, looking startled, "you're 'ere. I thought as much." Emma looked up with a face of innocent inquiry. "You 'aven't bin downstairs, 'ave you?" said Bessie, breathing deeply.

"No. Why? Aren't you going to bring me my tea?"

"Never mind why," said Bessie. "All in good time; I 'aven't forgotten. Oh lor!" she added irrelevantly, "oh lor!" and was gone again, looking more startled than ever.

In about half an hour she reappeared, bearing a small tray and a can of hot water.

"You can 'ave your tea in bed," she said. "I've done you a hegg. Look sharp, now, I 'aven't got all day." She set down the tray by the fire and with clumsy fingers began to unbutton Emma's pinafore. "I don't know what I'm at," she said, "I'm all fingers and thumbs. Be still, will you? My word, I wish your ma would come 'ome before some'ing bad 'appens."

"Why, what's the matter, Bessie?" said Emma, obediently stretching her arms so that her serge dress could be pulled up over her head. She began to untie the tapes of her crochet petticoat.

"Ask no questions and you'll be told no lies," said Bessie. "'Ere, let me get at those tapes. They're all of a knot." She released Emma from the crochet petticoat and the tucked and featherstitched flannel one underneath it. "Unfasten your drawers," she said, "while I get on with your boots." Emma meekly unbuttoned the waistband and then, hollowing her narrow chest, proceeded to unhook her scarlet stays while Bessie snatched at her boot buttons. Since the girl was obviously too much disturbed to keep silence, she knew that she had only to wait, asking no questions.

She kicked off her boots and Bessie drew down the thick black stockings and elastic garters.

"'Ave orf with that chemise, now, while I get your nightgown," said Bessie. "My word, I wish I could get under the bedclothes. Safest place in the 'ouse, if you ask me." Emma took off her chemise and slid her hands under her woolen vest to scratch. Bessie hung out her nightgown on the nursery fender.

"Fair gives me the creeps," said Bessie; "I don't like it, I tell you straight. Queer knockin's, and stones droppin' all over the shop. Frightened me out of a week's growth, I can tell you." Struggling up the tunnel of her flannel nightgown, Emma suppressed a smile.

"*What* frightened you, Bessie?"

Bessie glanced at the door, straightening her cuffs.

"I didn't ought to tell you," she said, "but it'll be all over the place as soon as your ma gets in. *Your grandma's 'ad a warning.*"

"A warning, Bessie?"

"You 'eard. A *warning*. Sittin' in 'er room, she was, when she 'ears a knock. Like this." Bessie delivered three slow, portentous raps on the end of the mantelpiece. "At first she thinks it's me. 'Come in,' she says, but nobody answers. Presently it comes again; like this." Again she knocked hollowly with her knuckles, and Emma could not repress a sympathetic shiver. "This time your grandma gets up and opens the door. 'Come in,' she says, 'oo is it?' Nobody there! But when she comes back to the table"—here Bessie dropped her voice and stretched a dramatic hand in front of her—"what do you think she saw?"

"Bessie! What?"

"A *black 'and*," said Bessie, "no arm, mind you, just a black 'and, floatin' in space. An' *then* what? It throws stones at 'er!"

"Bessie, don't!"

"Ah, you may well say, 'Bessie, don't.' I tell you, this place is 'aunted. I've 'eard things in the scullery at night'd make your 'air curl. I never said nothing, but many's the time I been frightened to look round the door for fear I'd see something. But those stones! Round, they are, and black as Old Nick. Oh, I do wish your ma would come 'ome. What if the old lady was took?"

"Took where?"

"'Oo knows?" said Bessie philosophically. "A warning like that means a death in the fam'ly; same as my aunt 'ad before she buried 'er eldest. Knockin' on the wall all night long there was, and 'e passed away at four o'clock in the mornin'."

Emma felt suddenly frightened. She knew perfectly well that Bessie

was embroidering the truth, or that her grandmother had fancied something which had not been there; nevertheless Bessie's description of the black hand, her knocking on the mantelpiece, her voice full of awful portent, touched her with apprehension. The failing light, the cupboard on the first floor landing, strange noises in the scullery, black hands in Grandma's bedroom pounced on her imagination with the full force of supernatural terror. She began to cry.

"Now then," said Bessie sharply, her voice returning to normal, "don't *you* start. I've got me 'ands full already with your grandma, let alone meself. I didn't ought to 'ave told you. Oh, whatever will your ma say? Don't you let on, now, whatever you do. You don't want to get poor Bessie into trouble, do you?"

She knelt down and put her arms round the weeping child.

"There," she said, "stop that noise, there's a poppet. Look, your egg'll be cold. Let's see 'ow quick you can get into bed and eat your supper."

"Don't leave me, Bessie, don't leave me!"

"I won't, then; not for a few minutes, any'ow. Look sharp, though, or Lily'll be 'ome wanting 'er tea, and I 'aven't even started to think about it."

A little ashamed of having frightened the child, but at the same time enjoying the relief of sharing her own fear, Bessie shepherded Emma to bed and put a shawl round her shoulders. Then she gave her the tray, lit the gas, poked up the fire to a cheerful blaze and drew the curtains. Somewhat reassured, Emma cracked the top of her egg and began to peel it.

"What's Grandma doing?" she asked curiously.

"Modgin' about some'ing chronic. Lookin' in all the cupboards and under the beds. 'Bessie,' she says, 'you needn't think I'm frightened. I've 'ad warnings before,' she says, 'many's and many's the time.' 'Well,' I says, 'if it was me,' I says, 'I'd be out of me mind.' Not frightened!" Bessie laughed scornfully. "I know better. Ringin' the bell fit to raise the dead, she was, an' as white as a sheet. She can't 'ave *me* on like that. Not frightened, indeed! If you ask me, it pretty near give 'er a stroke."

The evening passed in a pleasant mixture of alarm and triumph. Lily was told the whole story as soon as she came home, and sent to sit with Emma until bedtime. She sat on the bed, wrapped in a tartan rug, and improved the occasion by relating all the ghost stories she could remember, frightening herself and Emma into a state of hysteria. So

sensitive did they become to the least sound or shadow that even Lily could not summon courage to put her feet to the ground, and when Grandma came slowly upstairs to see if they were all right they shrieked at the sight of her and buried their heads in the coverlet.

"'Ush," said Grandma crossly. "'Old your noise, both of you. Silly, you be off to bed now. It's past eight o'clock."

"Oh, Grandma, need I?" wailed Lily. "I daren't go to bed alone. I couldn't, Grandma!" Her face was pale, and her hair, dragged back severely from her forehead by a circular comb, was wild and staring. Grandma's eyes, large and dark as a lemur's, watched Grandma anxiously over the edge of the blanket.

"Very well," said Grandma surprisingly, "just this once you'd better say where you are. Look sharp, now, and get undressed. I'll send Jessie up with your things."

Delighted, Lily began to unfasten the neck of her dress, still sitting on the bed.

"Grandma," she coaxed, "tell us what you saw! Tell us about the end, right from the beginning! Do, Grandma!" But Grandma would tell them nothing but to mind their own business, adding that little girls should be seen and not heard, and that if they asked no questions they would be told no lies; but they knew from the way she quavered about the room and the start she gave when the springs of the bed creaked, that she was thoroughly unnerved; and this in itself was a source of shuddering excitement.

Bessie, as usual, was more communicative, and by the time she came up with Lily's nightgown many new details had apparently come to light, which she described with backward glances and gestures of alarm, like the bearer of fatal news in a melodrama. Grandma's vision, as it appeared, the mysterious knockings and the sudden visitation of the tones, had been simply the climax of a long series of phenomena. The whole day had been marked by evil portents, and she, Bessie, had been the object of several. On the previous night she had dreamed of a newborn child, which, as everyone knew, meant a death. Then, shortly before Mrs. Hignett had rung her bell, while she was wiping down the top of the range and thinking of nothing in particular, the kitchen door had banged with supernatural force, and a saucepan had leaped from one of the shelves in the scullery. Nor was this all. When the bell had rung, Floss and Gyp, Mrs. Shardiloe's two Pomeranian dogs, who had been peacefully asleep in their basket under the table, had growled

"some'ing 'orrible," with every hair of their coats standing out from their bodies, and had stared with quivering intensity at the doorway. "You take it from me," she concluded, "those two dogs *seen* something."

Lily and Emma, frightened afresh by this sinister evidence, clung to each other for safety under the bedclothes. They begged Bessie not to leave them in the dark, and on her own responsibility she left the gas jet burning on the landing, and set their door open.

The whole house now seemed alive with creakings and stirrings, and it was only with an effort that Emma remembered that for this ghostly state of affairs she herself was responsible. Yet was she? The truth of her escapade in the secret passage was already blurred, overlaid by the frightening details of Bessie's stories. In imagination she saw the black hand of Grandma's vision more clearly than she saw herself, crouching on hands and knees on the dusty floor boards, with the troublesome pebbles hidden in her pinafore pocket. What if there had really been a hand there, as well as her own? The hand, perhaps, that had banged the kitchen door and dislodged the saucepan? Then, what had the dogs seen, when they bristled and growled? Dumb animals, Bessie had said, could see more than humans, and she had related a story of a clairvoyant cat to prove it. Lily's tales of hauntings and apparitions, too, had created an atmosphere in which fear and credulity flourished; and now, when she thought of the secret passage at all, it was with terror, as of a place where threatening hands groped in the darkness and the warnings of death were uttered.

The two children whispered together for a long time, their heads lying close on the pillow, frightening themselves with every stir of the sheets. At last, worn out with excitement and apprehension, they fell asleep.

Next morning the legend of Grandma's warning had gathered weight, and was given a new significance by Mrs. Shardiloe's firm refusal to discuss it in front of the children. As she and Grandma and Miss Fairey discussed little else all day there was a pregnant silence whenever Emma, who was now allowed downstairs, came into the room, and she was quick to realize that the incident had made an impression. Even Bessie would no longer talk about it, for when Mrs. Shardiloe had cautioned her about telling the children she had replied, "Oh, no, of course, 'm; I shouldn't dream of it," and was now going to elaborate lengths of trustworthy discretion. So many meaning looks

and cautionary frowns passed between her mother and Aunt Nellie at mealtimes that Emma began to enjoy a secret importance, and this pleasure naturally led to a desire to mystify them further.

This was not easy, for they were all—with the exception of Tom Shardiloe, who dismissed the whole thing as “a pack of nonsense” and received his mother-in-law’s story with rude incredulity—on the alert for further phenomena, glancing at each other apprehensively whenever a board creaked, or when the dogs, suspecting mice, stared at the wainscot.

Mrs. Shardiloe, like many people who have lived in the theater, had a strain of superstition in her nature, which constantly sought and found its confirmation; she was fond of discovering prophecies in her dreams, never drained a tea cup without finding in it some reference to the future, and could be uncomfortable for days if no minor mishap followed the breaking of a mirror. Miss Fairey, on the other hand, though she did not admit to superstition, took a serious interest in the occult; she could read hands a little and tell fortunes by cards, and had once even been to a party where there had been table-turning. She took an eager, reverent view of these things, and was full of stories, personally vouched for by friends or relations of friends, which proved there were invisible forces all around if one knew where to look for them, and that the palm of one’s hand, or the bottom of a tea cup, or a handful of playing cards, were as satisfactory places to look as any.

So they were a rich soil for the seeds of mystery to grow in; almost as rich, indeed, as Grandma herself, and more articulate; for the old woman, though she loved to recall the supernatural announcements of disaster to others, discovered a sudden dislike of the subject when the warning had been so evidently directed at herself. “I don’t want to ’ear any more about it,” she told her daughter sharply, when Mrs. Shardiloe, for perhaps the hundredth time, pressed for details. “The old lady’s upset,” Miss Fairey had said, “and no wonder”; and thereafter they had examined and elaborated the story at their leisure.

It really was, they told each other, extraordinary. Grandma had been sitting alone in her room with the door and window closed. Bessie had been down in the kitchen, where, it seemed, there had also been queer goings on, for these things never came singly. There had been nobody else in the house at the time but Emma, who was on a different floor, also with the door shut; and who at the time had been

sitting quietly by the fire, playing with her doll. Of course one could say that Grandma had imagined the whole thing; but if one did, how could one explain away the pebbles? Grandma had seen a sort of hand which had thrown them at her, and there, near the edge of the carpet, she had subsequently found them. No pane in the window had been broken, so that they could not have come from outside; nobody was hiding behind the curtains, and the stones had fallen some distance away from the fireplace. And the moment before Grandma with her own hands had fastened the door.

Then one had to remember that at that identical moment Floss and Gyp had got out of their basket and growled—Bessie was not sure whether this was before or after the ringing of the bell, but thought it was before; and as everyone knew, dogs and horses were particularly sensitive to the supernatural. What did it mean? Here the two women looked at each other steadily, and drew their chairs closer together. They searched their memories for incidents which might serve either as clue or corroboration, and were soon rewarded, as determined examiners of memory usually are, with precisely what they wanted. Miss Fairey recalled that she had once heard mysterious footsteps on the stairs, but had not thought them worth mentioning at the time; and Mrs. Shardiloe remembered a number of glasses which had been found shattered inside the dining room cupboard, nobody knew how; their condition had been a complete surprise to Bessie. Fortified by these disclosures Miss Fairey then called to mind an account she had read in the papers of similar occurrences in a foreign country—Hungary, she thought it was—in which a house had been so disturbed by a mischievous spirit that the occupants had been forced to leave it, taking their children with them; there had been noises in the night, windows broken, yes, and stones thrown too, all without human agency.

“Did anybody die?” said Mrs. Shardiloe. “I mean, did these things turn out to be a warning of a death in the family?”

“I don’t remember, Susan,” said Miss Fairey; “very likely they did. The paper didn’t say.”

Mrs. Shardiloe gazed thoughtfully at the fire.

“Supposing we look in the cards,” she suggested; “there wasn’t very much in them the day before yesterday.”

Miss Fairey obediently fetched a well-thumbed pack from a drawer in the chiffonier, where it was kept handy for emergencies requiring

a view of the future, and Mrs. Shardiloe called down to Bessie to make them some tea. Then, drawing up their chairs to the fender with the tray between them, they eliminated the twos, fours and sixes from the pack, shuffled, cut, and spread the cards out fanwise on a cushion, deeply considering the relation of the ace and nine of spades to the Queen of diamonds, who, they did not need to remind each other, represented Grandma.

During the next few days, which were the last of her convalescence, Emma gave a great deal of thought to further developments. Instinct warned her that it would be unwise to draw attention to herself, except as an invalid, and her behavior, in public at least, was irreproachable. She spent most of her time by the dining-room fire, dressing her doll, reading, and painting in water-colors; and most of her energy on schemes for alarming the family.

At first she was tempted to repeat the experiment of the upstairs passage; she could think of several things suitable to the purpose—earthworms, for instance, or the large tabby-striped slugs which came up the scullery drain at night and roamed viscously in the sink. To both of these, however, there were objections. Worms were not easy to come by at this time of year, when the black earth between the laurel roots was sour and hard, and it would certainly rouse suspicion to be caught digging in the garden. Slugs were easier; Bessie generally found one or two when she went down in the morning, and took a savage delight in covering them with a handful of salt, or throwing them into the kitchen fire, where they popped and sizzled; but Emma had such a horror of these creatures that she knew, on second thoughts, that she would never be able to handle them. There was also, perhaps, an element of danger in repeating so soon the trick she had played already; too thorough an examination of Grandma's room might reveal the all but invisible gap in the dark cornice which had started the trouble.

Instead, she reviewed Bessie's domain as a possible field, and almost at once hit upon the thing she was seeking. Bessie had complained of a saucepan leaping from the scullery shelf and would certainly be frightened out of her wits if the accident repeated itself. Surely, then, that could be easily managed! And if it were not, and the whole thing had to be passed off as a practical joke, Bessie, she thought, could be persuaded not to mention it.

Having made up her mind, and paid several casual visits to the scul-

lery to spy out the land, she fixed on a Tuesday afternoon for her experiment. Tuesday was Bessie's ironing day, a day on which Emma often spent hours in the kitchen, helping in the sprinkling and rolling down of handkerchiefs, and watching Bessie polishing the hot irons on a cloth full of candle-ends, before, with head bent and elbow powerfully rigid, she brought up a porcelain gloss on Mr. Shardiloe's collars. On other ironing days they had shared a cup of tea on the kitchen table, and Emma had been allowed to heat the small Italian irons which goffered the frills of uniform caps and Mrs. Shardiloe's petticoats; and Bessie would grow confidential about her home, and the young man she had once had; so that the hours passed in comfortable intimacy, in the almost-singeing smell of well-ironed aprons and the warmly suffocating odor of drying woollens.

Emma remembered what Mr. Morton had told her. If Bessie's attention were diverted to something else while by some means or other she managed to dislodge the saucepan, the trick was done; there remained only to decide upon the method, and to think of something to distract the sharp eyes of Bessie. Roaming about she opened and idly inspected the kitchen workbox, and here, in the midst of darning wool and tradesmen's bills and odds and ends, she found her instrument—a reel of stout black thread which had been recently used in the relining of the kitchen hearthrug. She put it in her pocket, and presently, while Bessie was laying the dining-room table for lunch, went into the scullery.

The saucepan shelf was out of reach, but there was a backless chair which Bessie herself used for climbing on; with its help Emma could easily step to the draining board and bring herself within comfortable distance of the smaller saucepans. A noose of thread could be placed round one, or even two; carried along the front of the shelf and over the scullery door into the kitchen. From there it was only a few yards to the big table where Bessie did her ironing, and Emma judged that against the dark woodwork and the darker floor the thread would lie unnoticed. Seated at the strategic end of the table, she would be able to manipulate it at the moment she chose, and provided that the scullery door were slightly ajar, as it usually was, the pots could be secretly pulled off the shelf without impediment. To satisfy herself she unwound a length of cotton from the reel and let it fall. Against the floor covering—an aged collection of overlapping rugs made out of fragments of colored rags which years of wear had trodden

into uniformity—it was already difficult to see; in the afternoon, when the hanging gas jet dazzlingly illumined the ironing sheet and sent tides of shadow from under the table to the dark edges of the room, it would be invisible. Emma contentedly wound in her cotton and hid it in the top of her stocking.

After lunch, while Bessie was clearing away upstairs, Emma carried out her plan with the black cotton. Her heart beat uncomfortably as she placed the noose over two small pots at the end of the shelf, but the risk of discovery was small; she could distinctly hear Bessie's unresilient tread in the dining room overhead; it was not the charwoman's day, and Aunt Nellie was not expected before tea-time; so that for the moment she was safe from interruption. Nevertheless she breathed more freely when she had dropped the cotton-reel over the top of the door, and, climbing down, retrieved it from the other side. The most perilous part of the operation was over. She paid out as much thread as she thought she would need, bit it off, and left the loose end hanging down the side of the dresser. Then she sauntered innocently upstairs to the little everyday sitting room overlooking the back garden, and spent the next half hour winding wool for her grandmother.

A suggestion of fog hung in the atmosphere, making eyes and throat smart if one went out of doors; it grew dark early. When Miss Fairey arrived, bearing a box of material for an afternoon's millinery, the gas was already lit, and Mrs. Shardiloe, who wanted to discuss the subject still uppermost in her mind, played into Emma's hands by sending her away. "Go down and have your tea with Bessie," she said. "I want to have a talk with Aunt Nellie." Delighted at being told to do the very thing she intended, Emma descended soberly to the kitchen.

"Well, now," said Bessie, "we'll give ourselves a treat, then. I got some crumpets kep' back"; and she toasted them at the fire, where her irons were heating, and soaked them liberally with butter.

Emma had a moment's misgiving. Bessie made her so welcome, was so companionably kind, that her plan seemed almost treachery. Yet, as she told herself, it could do no harm to Bessie; the trick, if it worked, would only frighten her; it could not get her into trouble. And there was something even in the thought of Bessie's terror that sharpened her appetite.

When they had eaten their crumpets, and the cups and plates had been carried into the scullery, Bessie broke the interesting news that

she had got a new young man. At least, she said, he might very well turn out to be so, though she had met him only once, at her married sister's. "'E's takin' me for a walk next Sunday," she said, skillfully spitting on a hot iron and watching the bead of saliva skid hissing off the surface. "I shan't arf laugh! Our mother 'asn't took to 'im at all. 'Now then, our Bessie,' she says, 'you let 'im alone. I don't like the way 'e looks,' she says." Bessie laughed reminiscently, trying the iron on a well-singed corner of the sheet. "I'll battle 'er, though," she said, "if I've a mind."

Emma wandered to the dresser and studied the view of the Crystal Palace on the lid of the workbox.

"What's his name?" she said, simulating interest. Her eye sought for the black thread in the shadow of the dresser.

"Thomas Appleyard," said Bessie, tossing her head. "Well, I think it's a pretty name, though there's many that wouldn't agree, I dare say. 'Is parents come from Derbyshire, but 'e was born in Norfolk; not far from my sister's, come to that. 'Well,' I says to 'im, 'what a queer name,' I says, 'it puts me in mind of a piece of po'try.' 'Oh,' says 'e, 'what piece of po'try, may I ask?' 'Oh, go on,' I says, 'I'll tell you another time.' So then 'e asks me to go for a walk on Sunday."

"And shall you tell him the piece of poetry on Sunday?" asked Emma, who by this time had unobtrusively got the thread between her fingers. With her hands clasped behind her she came back to the table.

"Ah," said Bessie, "that depends. I'll see 'ow 'e be'aves 'imself. Any'ow, it ain't reely po'try; I made it up meself, after we was introduced."

Emma sat down at the end of the table, her hands between her knees. She could feel the thread firmly between her fingers, and slowly, very slowly, began to wind it in.

"Say the piece of poetry, Bessie," she begged.

"Lor," said Bessie, hanging her head and laughing, "it's silly, reely. I don't know what I was thinkin' of. Any'ow, 'ere goes. 'Oh, Thomas Appleyard, the music of thy name.' There!" she cried, slamming down the iron on its metal stand, "'ow's that for a chump? I dunno what come over me."

"I think it's very pretty," said Emma truthfully, "isn't there any more of it?"

"No," said Bessie, ironing away again, "I didn't get no further than

that. 'Oh, Thomas Appleyard, the music of thy name.' It sounds like po'try, though, don't it? O' course," she conceded, "there's cleverness in our family. Our father used to make up things all the time. Easy as wink, 'e did. 'E did a piece once for my birthday, when I was a kid. Like this it went —

'Our Bessie,
She ain't dressy.
Oh what a joy
If she'd bin born a boy.'

You see," she explained, "our father always wanted a boy. Disappointed 'im cruel, it did, 'avin' nothin' but a pack o' girls. 'E was very fond of me, though, when I was a baby."

She held the iron near her cheek, and appearing dissatisfied with it, set it down on the sheet and went to the range, where she applied the same test to the others. At the same moment Emma arrived at the end of the slack in her thread, and held her breath. Now was the moment. If she delayed, Bessie might walk round the wrong end of the table, and encounter the thread. She moistened her lips, preparing the chosen formula.

"I smell burning, Bessie," she said suddenly.

Bessie exclaimed and sprang back to the table to snatch up the iron, and as she did so Emma wound the thread rapidly round her left hand. There was a shattering crash in the scullery.

Bessie screamed and let the iron fall on the table. She looked at Emma, her mouth dropped open.

"Mercy save us!" she said, putting her hands up to her face, "did you 'ear that?" The echoes of the crash were still ringing, and one of the saucepans was rocking to a standstill on the flags. Emma, unnerved by the violence of the noise, gaped back at her.

"It's that cat!" said Bessie stoutly, though without conviction. "It's that dratted cat from next door!" She went slowly to the scullery door, hesitated, then flung it open. Under cover of the table Emma rapidly wound in the rest of her cotton.

To her relief, it came easily. The noose had not, as she had feared it might, caught on either of the saucepan handles or any other obstacle. She wound it frantically on her hand to the very end and stuffed the tangle in her pinafore pocket. That done, she cautiously followed into the scullery.

Bessie was standing in the middle of the floor, her hands still at her cheeks. One saucepan lay at her feet, the other had come to rest under the mangle. Emma saw with surprise that her face was without color. She stared at Emma without moving, and at length moistened her lips and spoke in a whisper.

"There's no cat," she said, "the window's shut, like I thought. And look at those pots on the floor! Who could ha' done it?"

Emma looked, as she was told. The window was shut, the scullery orderly and quiet. There lay the saucepans, as she had intended they should. There was nothing to be afraid of. Yet, as she glanced round, peering at shelves and shadows, something of Bessie's terror invaded her, so that she was pierced and shaken by the same fear which had caught her in the general alarm before, when she had played her trick on Grandma. She shrank closer to Bessie and grasped her arm.

"Come back into the kitchen, Bessie," she said urgently, "please, please do!" Bessie put an arm round her and they went back together. Bessie was still pale. She leaned faintly against the kitchen table.

"Well," she said, "if that don't beat all! I'm goin' right up to your ma this minute and tell 'er. There's some'ing very queer goin' on in this 'ouse. I don't like it." A thought suddenly struck her. "I'm glad you was 'ere when it 'appened," she said, "you'll bear me out, won't you? Sittin' right there at the table, you was, and me opposite there, tryin' the iron. 'Why,' I says to myself, first go-off, 'there's that dratted cat on the shelf,' I says, 'I'll give it what for.' But there wasn't no cat, was there, Em? And the windows was shut—you seen that as plain as I did. *And* the back door bolted. Yet we both 'eard the noise, and there are them two pots a-layin' on the floor. What can you make of it?"

"Oh, Bessie," said Emma, not without truth, "I'm frightened. Let's go upstairs."

"That we will," said Bessie, suddenly taking resolution and springing away from the table, "and quick, too, before anything else 'appens." They hurried breathlessly upstairs, keeping close together.

The effect of Bessie's announcement on Miss Fairey and Mrs. Shardiloe exceeded even Emma's expectations. From the moment when she burst into the room, hardly pausing to knock, with a gasp of "Please 'm, oh please, 'm!" the whole incident began to swell with drama. Mrs. Shardiloe looked from one to the other, and then, meaningly, at Miss Fairey. They both got to their feet.

"Are you sure, Bessie, are you *sure*?" she said.

"As sure as I stand 'ere before you, 'm," said Bessie, "and Emma 'ere will tell you the same. We was in the kitchen together when it 'apened." All eyes turned toward Emma, who, thoroughly frightened by this time, began to whimper.

"Come along, Nellie," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "I'm going to look into this myself." And she rustled ominously out of the room with Miss Fairey at her heels, and the three of them went down together to the kitchen.

Here Bessie repeated her story at least twenty times, illustrating as she went along with graphic gestures. She was standing just so, she said, holding the iron to her cheek, and Emma was sitting like this, at the end of the table. Then they had smelt singeing, and she had run to the table, like this. And then it had happened.

The three women went warily into the scullery, Bessie carrying a taper. She indicated the closed window, the bolted door, the saucepans. "It *must* have been a cat," said Mrs. Shardiloe nervously, holding her skirt as though prepared to take to her heels at any moment.

"But 'ow *could* it 'ave been a cat, 'm?" said Bessie. "Where did it get in, 'm? Tell me that!" They searched gingerly in the corners, opened cupboards, looked under the sink and behind the mangle, and were forced to agree with her.

"What did I tell you?" said Miss Fairey in a low voice. "It's the same as that case I read about in the paper." She shivered.

"Well, Tom will have to do something about it, Nellie. This can't go on. We shall none of us feel safe in our beds."

"It's the only place where I *shall* feel safe, please 'm," said Bessie, "I shan't fancy bein' down 'ere alone after this, I promise you."

"The master shall be told," said Mrs. Shardiloe firmly, "he will know what's best."

"Yes 'm, I hope so, 'm," said Bessie, though privately she doubted it.

Chapter III

WHEN HE CAME HOME, SILENT AS USUAL AND FULL OF his own affairs, Tom Shardiloe was greeted with a burst of domestic hysteria. A morose little man, who had not altogether relished giving up his music-hall connections for the sake of what remained of old Mr. Hignett's business in surgical appliances (though even he had to admit that it had been worth while, since suburban management was always a gamble, and the artificial limbs on which Mr. Hignett had built his prosperity were presumably more stable), he comforted himself whenever possible by asserting his male common sense in an otherwise feminine household, and would have suffered torture rather than admit that any excitement of his wife's or Nellie Fairey's was other than contemptible. "You believe everything you're told," he always annoyed them by saying, "you ought to have more sense at your age, Susan"; and he often maddened his wife by facetious comments on their fortunetelling. "Better look in the cards," he would say, "and tell me what's going to win the Derby this year. I could do with it." Or, when she and Miss Fairey disputed over alternative trimmings for a hat, "See what the cards recommend, my dear, and stop arguing."

Now, confronted by this news of supernatural alarms, he adopted his pooh-poohing manner, and could not be persuaded even to examine the scullery until he had eaten his supper. Then, with raised eyebrows, and the air of a man who is going to clear up all this nonsense in a very few minutes, he allowed himself to be led downstairs and to be shown the saucepans, which were still, for greater conviction, left lying where they had fallen.

"A cat, of course," he said instantly, and turned on his heel, scornfully dismissing the subject.

"But the window was shut, Tom, and the door locked."

"Well, Emma, then. She must have done it while Bessie's back was turned."

"But she couldn't reach that shelf. And in any case, she was sitting at the kitchen table all the time."

"H'm," said Mr. Shardiloe, with a lofty smile, "so Bessie *says*."

"Well, I never!" said his wife. "What a disgraceful thing to say! I'm sure Bessie would never tell me an untruth; would you, Bessie?"

"No, 'm; I should hope not, indeed, 'm," said Bessie, not knowing whether to be affronted at Mr. Shardiloe's aspersion or touched by her mistress's surprising faith in her veracity.

Mr. Shardiloe, in fact, though he refused to admit defeat, was unable to offer any explanation which the others would accept, and had to satisfy himself by insisting that the saucepans must have been placed on the shelf carelessly, and had fallen onto the floor of their own accord. Simple and obvious, he said; ridiculous to make a fuss about it.

Nevertheless, the incident puzzled him, and next morning as soon as Grandma came down he took the opportunity of going up to her room and examining it thoroughly. These two occurrences were certainly very odd; taken together, it looked almost as though the women might be right; but of course such a thing was impossible. How could one be sure, since no infallible male eye had been there to see, that Grandma's window had not been open at the time, or that a cat had not really been lurking in the scullery, escaping unseen by Bessie through the kitchen? All that he had to go on was the word of a silly old woman and an excitable servant. It was not worth bothering about. Still, he examined the window of Grandma's room attentively, and could not quite bring himself to suppose that it had really been open, since it never was. Grandma held the orthodox belief that all air was noxious, an element to be held at bay as much as possible, and that to admit it to one's room on a winter's day would be almost as certainly fatal as sitting on the grass in summer, or taking poison. Yet by what other means could the stones have been thrown in? The chimney was well stuffed with newspaper, as all bedroom chimneys naturally were when nobody was ill. It was very puzzling. He failed to discover—which was not surprising, since from below it was invisible—the ill-fitting join in the plaster molding which ran darkly round the edge of the ceiling and came to a shoddy conclusion at the back of the pelmet. In public he would, of course, continue to despise the problem, but in spite of himself he was stirred by secret interest.

This interest was fanned by Emma's third experiment. She was completely caught, now, by the fascination of the game, and roamed about in an abstracted dream, feeding on self-importance. The only

flies in this soothing ointment, which was as sweet as sirup and salved the nagging itch for flattering notice, were that her own cleverness in the affair could never be acknowledged, and—though this was of less consequence—the suspiciousness of Lily. “Come on now, tell us,” Lily had said after the saucepan incident, “you did it, didn’t you? You must have done it.” “If that’s what you think,” said Emma coldly, “ask Bessie, that’s all. I was in the kitchen with her the whole time. I was more frightened than she was.” But Lily, who had already heard Bessie’s account more times than she could number, did not ask her. Indeed, she herself inclined to accept the spirit theory, and was only irritated that Emma, and not she, had been involved in it. She relieved her exasperation by writing “Bessie is a fool” in pink chalk on the back door, and made capital out of these new excitements among her friends at Miss Swanston’s. From these accounts her classmates understood that her grandmother had been all but killed by stones dropping from the air, and that life in the scullery was made hazardous by a rain of saucepans.

For its third manifestation the poltergeist turned its attention to Mrs. Shardiloe. Emma was growing ambitious, and felt that the frightening of Bessie and her grandmother had been almost too easy. Her mother was a harder nut to crack, since she would undoubtedly be angrier than anyone else if she discovered a culprit; but the prospect for that very reason was all the more tempting, and Emma applied her wits to it.

Her experience with the cotton drawn over the top of the door had taught her that the top of a door was a place where nobody looked, except, perhaps, once a year, when Bessie went round with a pair of steps and a pail in the course of spring-cleaning. Here, then, was a good place for hiding some small object; and it had this additional advantage, that when the door was closed the object would fall, apparently from nowhere.

The missile she chose was her mother’s favorite brooch, a large gold fan-shaped ornament set with colored stones. Mrs. Shardiloe wore this nearly every day, especially in the evening, and it lived in a tangle of rings, chains, hairpins and odd glove-buttons in a velvet-lined box in the top drawer of her dressing table. Emma removed it in the morning, soon after her mother had gone downstairs and before Bessie had started to do the bedrooms, wrapped it in paper, and hid it inside the lining of one of her hats. Here she kept it for twenty-four hours,

enjoying the hue and cry and industriously assisting in the general search. Some instinct of showmanship, which Mr. Morton would professionally have approved, made her prolong the loss until the mystery had had time to thicken; too quick a discovery would have robbed the trick of its value, and the reappearance of the brooch might have seemed less mysterious; so she allowed her mother to search and exclaim for the rest of the day, and Bessie to endure the discomforts of unspoken suspicion.

"I 'ope you don't think I've taken it, 'm," Bessie said at once, when the loss was made known. "I'm sure I shouldn't touch anything that didn't belong to me. I never 'ave and I never shall. I'm sure nobody can take away my character . . ."

"I'm not saying you took it," said Mrs. Shardiloe, her manner conveying more clearly than words that this was what she thought. "All I say is, I put it in the box with my own hands last night, and it's not there now. How do you account for it?" Bessie, of course, could not account for it at all, and spent much time on her hands and knees in Mrs. Shardiloe's bedroom, looking under furniture and wiping her nose plaintively on the back of her hand, but without result. The brooch had disappeared completely.

The next morning Emma took it from its hiding-place and pinned it to her stays. As watchful and deceptively idle as a cat, she stalked her opportunity. She caught it beautifully at five minutes to one, when she went upstairs to wash her hands, and her mother was in the dining room, rummaging cutlery.

Her mother's door was slightly ajar, and she left it so. All she had to do was to take a chair from the wall, climb on it, and from there, somewhat unsteadily, to the pedestal cupboard at the head of the double bed, where she could reach the door and place the brooch in position. She climbed down cautiously and carried the chair back where she had found it. As she did so she heard a grunt and a familiar rhythmic dragging noise on the landing, and waited behind the door until her grandmother had had time to reach the turn of the stairs. Then she flew down the backstairs to the hall, arriving demurely before her in the dining room.

There was skate and caper sauce for lunch, two things she did not care for, and as her nervous excitement deepened appetite deserted her. The crucial moment, she knew, would be when her mother retired upstairs for her nap. Her stomach quaked already with suspense,

and the fact that Mrs. Shardiloe was clearly in an irritable mood did nothing to appease it. She began to fancy that she was not unsuspected; her father glanced at her sourly from time to time, and Aunt Nellie gave her a sharp look when she helped her to mashed turnips.

"Lost your appetite again?" said Aunt Nellie, when the turnips remained untouched. "Feeling all right, aren't you?"

"I don't feel very well," Emma admitted, sinking lower in her chair, "I've got a headache."

"What, again?" said Mrs. Shardiloe. "I don't know what's the matter with you, I'm sure. It was only yesterday you had your compound rhubarb."

"You take my advice and give 'er a black draught," said Grandma through a mouthful of fish; "that's what you always 'ad as a child. Nothing to beat it. Is there any stout open, Tom?"

Emma turned her face away from the table. She knew those black draughts—strong Epsom salts dissolved in a rank brew of senna—and the very mention of them made her shudder. Often ailing, she had run through the whole gamut of homemade remedies, and, possibly excepting confection of senna, which looked like black boot polish and was not entirely unpalatable, impartially loathed them. The pills made of compound rhubarb, which she had been given the previous morning, were among the worst. Rolled by hand and dipped in flour, they were so large that it was impossible to swallow one without the filthy pellet smashing at the back of the mouth, leaving an indescribable bitterness. The only defense was to hold them unswallowed against the palate until one was alone, and then push them into the groove at the bottom of the window shutters, or under the carpet. Spring was made dreadful by a course of brimstone and treacle, administered on waking for nine consecutive mornings, after which there was a lapse of nine carefully counted days before it was resumed. There was no escaping this, and the winter was even richer in remedial horrors. Cod liver oil, floating on a spoonful of orange wine, was an invariable preliminary to the midday meal, and destroyed what little appetite Emma possessed. A concoction of camphor and Epsom salts cooled the blood, raisins steeped in senna tea regulated the system, and a glass of hot milk with a tablespoonful of suet sprinkled on top gave wholesome nourishment to a queasy stomach. Chilblains and colds in the head brought their own troubles. The tight, tender skin of the toes was rubbed with half a raw onion dipped in

salt; a sore throat was punished with a vinegar gargle. A cough called for linseed tea, so stewed and gluey that one had to close one's teeth to stop drinking: a cold on the chest meant a heart-shaped piece of brown paper, greasily smeared with Russian tallow and tightly bound to the body with strips of flannel. Even the discomforts of a running nose had to be aggravated by a tallow candle, well-warmed and blackened in the smoke of a wax taper at bedtime and liberally rubbed all over the nose and forehead. And once, but only once, since the resistance had been of such demented violence, Dr. Ashe had attempted leeches for facial neuralgia.

"I don't want a black draught, Mother," said Emma weakly.

"It's not what you want, it's what you need," said her grandmother; "eat up your dinner, then."

"I can't," said Emma, not looking at her plate.

"Very well then, watch them as can," said the old woman tartly, filling her mouth with turnip. She had no patience with such vagaries.

Emma's nausea, however, served her well on this occasion, for it was while she was safely in the bathroom, being coaxed into drinking the hated black draught by Aunt Nellie, that Mrs. Shardiloe went into her bedroom and closed the door, and her thin scream told Emma that the trap had worked.

"Gracious!" said Miss Fairey, spilling some of the mixture, "whatever's that?" She hastily set down the glass and ran out of the room. "Are you hurt, Susan?"

Mrs. Shardiloe was not hurt, but she was frightened; so much, indeed, that she forgot to conceal her evident alarm from Emma, and told Miss Fairey what had happened in a voice which rang without effort all over the house.

"Dropped on me!" she cried, "just dropped on me the minute I went into the room! One minute it isn't there, and the next it's dropped through the air and lying at my feet!" She held out the brooch at arm's length, as if to prove her statement. Then she saw Emma and lowered her arm. "Has that child had her dose yet?" She was still breathless with shock, but a dose was a dose, and she wanted to get rid of Emma.

"I was just giving it her," said Miss Fairey, getting flustered; "oh Susan, d'you think it's the same . . . ?" Mrs. Shardiloe cut her short with a warning frown.

"Give it her quickly, then, and come with me. I'm going to show

this to Mother." And she swept downstairs as if there were not a moment to be lost, holding the brooch in front of her.

The family conference on this new phenomenon lasted all afternoon, and Emma was naturally excluded. She fretted about the house, too uncertain of her success to attempt anything new. Had this trick been too simple? Were they at this moment discussing her, voicing their suspicions? Even Bessie was summoned to the conclave, and Lily, when she came home from school, was closeted with her mother. Emma began to feel apprehensive and miserable. She ate her tea without relish, oppressed by Lily's superior air and refusal to answer her deliberately nonchalant inquiries. "You'll know all in good time," she said darkly. Emma went up to bed when she was told, for once without protest.

To tell the truth, Lily's hint was unfair, and purely malicious. None of them, so far, suspected Emma. "She was with me in the bathroom at the time!" Miss Fairey cried whenever the child was mentioned, and indeed, neither Miss Fairey nor Mrs. Shardiloe herself was in any mood for reasonable suspicion. Love of the marvelous, which lies not so deeply hidden under the civilized skin, was tickling their nerves and heating their imaginations; they wished, now, to believe that a supernatural influence was at work in the house, and would have been disappointed and a little indignant at a prosaic exposure. In this Bessie, who believed everything, and Mrs. Hignett, who, though not quite capable of Bessie's all-embracing credulity, was by no means averse to a haunting so long as it did not reserve its warnings exclusively for herself, supported them; and it was left to Mr. Shardiloe to give Emma her one taste of panic.

He came up to her bedroom with a candle, which he put down beside the bed so that he could watch her face; and Emma, gazing at him apprehensively from the pillow, was aware that her mother was hovering on the landing. But he, even he, seemed easily satisfied by her innocent denials, and when she saw that he believed her, terror vanished, and was succeeded by a sudden feeling of contempt.

"I told you so!" her mother said in a stage whisper as he closed the door; "she was with me the entire morning, and in the bathroom with Nellie, as I said, when it actually happened."

Left alone in the dark with her thoughts, Emma brooded triumphantly. Where was grown-up infallibility now, if even her parents had been deceived so easily? Mr. Morton, she thought, would have

found her out in an instant. He saw what one really did, not what one wished him to see; that was the important thing to avoid when dealing with audiences. An illusionist had better pack up, he had said, if he couldn't prevent it. Her parents, then, were as blind as Mr. Morton's public; blinder, for her tricks had possessed no real cleverness, no sleight of hand as he would have understood it; not even the skill required for palming a halfpenny.

It was almost as if, indeed, they wished to be duped. It interested them; it gave them a queer pleasure. They felt out of the ordinary by virtue of these very deceptions; and though they would undoubtedly have been angry with Emma if they had discovered her, their anger would have been only superficially against herself, more deeply as a kind of revenge for their lost miracles. To be singled out for strange manifestations is an alarming thing, but not altogether disagreeable. The owners of manors, though they deprecate the ghostly legends of their own corridors, do not, for all that, relish exposure. The figure in the long gallery revealed as an accident of moonlight, the opening door explained as the effect of warp, are triumphs of common sense which they receive coldly.

So, for all their expressed annoyance and alarm, the Shardiloes began to take a pride in these queer happenings; an unacknowledged pride, it is true, and scarcely realized; but none the less real; and in a subtle way flattering to their vanity. The mystery provided a stimulus to conversation, a new topic to be embroidered at leisure for their friends, a personal and authentic contact with the marvelous. Unconsciously they lent it their support. Their senses grew nervously alert to sounds and signs, magnified by the ready lens of imagination. A creaking stair-board, a banging door, became significant; a sudden draught provoked an exchange of glances. Scarcely a day passed but Bessie had some fresh incident to relate, or Grandma was newly aware of ghostly noises. The ball which Emma had started rolled and grew, so that even she lost sight of its beginnings, and began to believe it was none of her own making. With the two remaining pebbles thrown away and the tangle of thread consumed in the sitting-room fire, she lost touch with those actions in which they had played a part, and, like her mother, contrived very nearly to forget what was better forgotten.

Her only dissatisfaction, and it increased rapidly, was that the interest she had aroused was not in herself; and her efforts to capture

it narrowly avoided discovery. Indeed, it was only the kindness of Mr. Morton that saved her, and he wondered uneasily afterwards if he had been a fool.

Long before, Emma had learned from Bessie that one of her younger sisters had been a sleepwalker; and the picture of the child in her nightgown, eyes closed, arms outstretched, finding her way at night faultlessly about the house, had remained in her memory. In the end, Bessie had said, they had had to tie bags on her hands like babies' gloves, and after that, robbed of the sense of touch, she had awakened by stumbling.

The notion of walking in her sleep now occurred to Emma, and she no sooner hit on the idea than she put it into practice. The first performance was not successful, since, though she wandered on the stairs until she was cold, she met nobody, and after a time went back to bed discouraged. The second attempt was more fruitful, for she was careful to stay awake until nearly midnight, when her parents were preparing for bed. She heard them moving about on the first-floor landing, and managed to be halfway down the second flight when Mr. Shardiloe, carrying his collar and tie and his front teeth, came out of the bathroom.

To her surprise, he did not run or exclaim as her mother would have done, but came quietly up the stairs toward her, and putting an arm round her shoulders guided her firmly and with complete absence of fuss back to her room. Though she was unprepared for such matter-of-fact treatment she had enough self-control to keep her eyes shut and her arms extended, and climbed dreamily back into bed with no more than a nervous and momentary fluttering of the eyelids.

The next day, though she was treated with tender solicitude by everyone but Lily, nobody mentioned the matter, and she was given a wry concoction of herbs and a pill at bedtime. Sleepwalking, evidently, was apt to have disagreeable consequences, which Bessie in her slapdash way had forgotten to mention. The incident was not repeated.

At the beginning of the week Emma went back to school, and found herself a temporary heroine. The sleepwalking episode had been communicated, with dramatic additions, to Lily's friends, and the other manifestations were well known at Miss Swanston's. Emma

found to her pleasure that her sleepwalking was regarded as in some way connected with these, and that for the first time she was a central figure in their history.

This tempted her to try a further experiment, this time on Miss Wetherby; and to this end she took one of her black-and-white mice to school, hidden in the brown hollands pocket which she wore under her petticoats. Exactly what she would do with it she did not know, but she had a rough idea of hiding it in Miss Wetherby's desk, or introducing it into the arithmetic class in a way that would cause some pleasing confusion and terror. In this she misjudged her woman, for Miss Wetherby was as much proof against alarms of this sort as she was against most weaknesses of human nature; disciplined, unbending and correct, she would have thought as little of pinching a mouse between finger and thumb as she would of keeping Emma for an hour after school to weep over long division. It was this rigidity of hers as much as loathing for the subject she taught which had made Emma hate her. She hated her dusty, puffed-up hair, her stiff collars and tartan blouses, the long dry spatulate fingers, permanently ingrained with white chalk from the blackboard, which could take such a vise-like grip of one's shoulder or score through one's sums so contemptuously with a pencil. To Miss Wetherby, for her part, Emma was an unpleasant little girl, unforgivably lazy and deliberately stupid, whom it was only fair to pursue with sarcasms and detentions.

When Emma, therefore, discovering that her mouse had died quietly of suffocation on the way to school, set up a wail in the middle of a demonstration of fractions, Miss Wetherby instantly turned her out of the room, and after discovering the cause of the outcry, and appealing to Miss Swanston for authority, sent her home in disgrace, hoping that she would find her appearance painful enough to explain when she finally got there.

But Emma did not go home. Instead, she walked quickly away down Egerton Road and turned to the right, which took her in the opposite direction from Brixton Hill. At first, except that she was unwilling to go home and face her mother, she could not have given a reason for this behavior; but after a few minutes' walking, when she had controlled her tears, she discovered that she intended to run away, or at least to get lost and turn the tables by thoroughly frightening everybody.

She was a little frightened herself, and walked briskly, turning first one corner and then another, keeping on at a purposeful pace as though she knew well enough where she was going. She was not accustomed to being out alone, and at first imagined that the eyes of every passer-by were upon her, and that sooner or later she would be stopped and challenged, if not by a policeman at least by someone who recognized her or guessed her purpose. With her hands thrust determinedly in her little moleskin muff and her boots ringing smartly on the pavement, she kept on for the best part of an hour, when, her apprehensions being somewhat less, she began to pay some attention to her surroundings.

The streets were wider here, and full of traffic. The paved road rang with the hoofs of horses and the rumble of buses; carts, cabs and carriages bowled along within a yard of the curb, and crossings were made alarming by boys on bicycles. She had come into a district of shops, and the pavements were crowded. Women loitered in front of the windows, nursemaids walked carefully, guiding their perambulators, and the stream of pedestrians flowed by at a businesslike pace, everybody but herself, it seemed, confidently hurrying to some proper destination.

She paused at a crossing and looked doubtfully about her, and as she did so a tall woman in furs stopped too, and looked at her inquiringly.

"Are you lost, little girl?" she said.

"No, thank you," said Emma, rejecting an impulse to ask the way to Brixton Hill. "I'm just waiting to cross the road."

"I'll see you across, then," said the lady. "Give me your hand." She held Emma's wrist tightly, and when there was a lull in the traffic guided her swiftly to the opposite pavement.

"Are you sure you ought to be out alone?" said her companion, looking at her curiously.

"Oh yes," said Emma primly, and added, on the inspiration of the moment, "I'm going to my grandma's."

"I see," said the lady, with a faint smile; "good-by, then."

"Good-by," said Emma, and marched off as though there were not a moment to be wasted.

After what seemed an eternity of walking on increasingly tedious and even squalid pavements she crossed Westminster Bridge, and stayed for a while looking over the edge of the parapet. By standing

on the plinth and resting her elbows on the stone ledge she could see over fairly easily, and became absorbed in the strange activities of the river. She had never seen it before, and its brownness and muddiness surprised her. The tide was at ebb, and glistening banks of slime shelved down to the water. In one of these two ragged boys waded up to their knees, dragging their legs slowly in the heavy mud, apparently searching for something. They were some distance apart, and from time to time shouted to one another; their thin cries floated mournfully up to Emma.

Below her on the dirty water a piece of orange peel floated, tossed over, perhaps, by some passer-by on the bridge. Emma noticed for the first time that she was hungry. It must be long past dinner time, for the light was fading; it had a cold, fogged, late-afternoon look, the kind of light by which one normally had tea. She watched a coal barge draw slowly under the bridge, its sails down, making slow way with the tide. How long would it take to reach the sea? she wondered. Perhaps the sea was quite close, only just out of sight round that mass of dirty buildings; perhaps, too, she would find her way to the ships and go as a stowaway. But this idea, which in the safety of Brixton Hill would have seemed adventurously possible, now only frightened her, and she began to wish she had, after all, gone home. Lily, she thought, would be sitting down to her tea, and Bessie would be buttering crumpets in the kitchen. She hoped, on the other hand, that they would be too much distressed by her loss to think of tea at all. It would be horrible of them to have tea as though nothing had happened. She was resentful and hungry.

At this moment a boy with a basket of bread on his arm stopped beside her and looked over the parapet. The bread smelled fresh and new, and she glanced at it sideways, with longing.

"Wotcher lookin' at?" said the boy eagerly. She noticed, which he apparently did not, that his nose was running.

"Nothing," said Emma, turning back to the river. Suspiciously, and as if fearful of missing something, the boy stared hard at the water.

"Garn," he said at last, with disgust, "there ain't nothin' there." His suspiciousness now fastened itself on Emma. "Lorst yer wy?" he inquired unpleasantly.

Emma did not answer. Silence, she had been brought up to believe, was the only answer to dirty boys who accosted one; she also hoped that he would feel snubbed, and leave her. This, however, he did not

do. Instead, he caught the eye of a respectable-looking man coming over the bridge, and indicated Emma with a significant gesture.

"Lorst," he said triumphantly, when the man halted.

"I'm *not* lost," said Emma, beginning to feel alarmed. She stepped down off the parapet and put her hands in her muff. "I'm on my way," she told the man, "to my grandma's."

"Where does your grandma live?" said the man kindly. It seemed unlikely that a child of her age, nicely dressed too, should be wandering about alone in this part of London.

The kindness of his tone, however, was lost on Emma, who in this bearded man saw only an alarming stranger who had stopped to question her.

"Brixton," she said in a whisper, looking at the pavement.

"Brixton" exclaimed the man, "you're a long way off Brixton. Sure you know the way?"

"Yes, thank you," said Emma, breaking away and starting to walk rapidly in the direction of Westminster.

"Hi!" shouted the boy after her, "come back! That's the wrong wy!" But Emma hurried on, looking straight in front of her.

It was half-past six when Mr. Morton, fastening the top button of his overcoat, stepped from a doorway in Long Acre to look for a cab. It was a nasty raw evening, he decided, and he had better get a steak and porter inside him before the theater. Perhaps a dozen of oysters, too, would raise his spirits; he was feeling a little anxious and discouraged, and the best way he knew of comforting the heart was to flatter the stomach.

Life, he reflected, taking up his position under a street lamp where a passing hansom could not fail to see him, was going too fast. He was only in his fifties, when a man, and especially an artiste, could be said to be in his prime; yet there were already too many younger chaps in the business whom he watched with misgiving.

The trouble with an illusionist was that he could never stand still. One's best effects—well, they lasted for years, perhaps, and one shouldn't grumble; but all too soon some jumped-up newcomer had stolen one's specialities and slightly improved them, and one was left with a bag of tricks that audiences had seen before, and considered stale. Besides, the whole conception of stage magic was rapidly changing. The real stuff, the sleight-of-hand and skill that took years to achieve, was no longer

spectacular enough for these modern audiences. What they wanted was elaborate mechanical sets, expensive scenery, fancy costumes; illusions that depended less on the magician than on a commercial carpenter and inventor. In work of this kind the illusionist himself was little better than a ringmaster, directing the attention of the audience while a girl in spangles squeezed herself in or out of the trick partitions of a faked cabinet. If an illusionist could invent his own mechanical effects, well and good; but how many of them were capable of it? Performance and invention were two different things, and he for one had never claimed to be more than an excellent performer. Nothing more: yet this was what needed genius, not the mechanical craft of a man with blue-prints in a carpenter's shop. The hand that concealed while it produced, the suavity of movement that disguised itself even in action, the human cunning that could direct the attention of a thousand eyes to some innocent point where the magician wished it to lie—these, and not the contrivances of engineering, were the things that made a really great illusionist.

Mr. Morton hailed a hansom and gave the name of a restaurant. Settled back in the musty darkness of the little cabin, which smelled strongly of stables and upholstery, he continued his brooding.

This fellow Devant, for instance, at the Egyptian Hall. He might perhaps be called a real magician, one of the old school: but it was difficult to tell at this stage how he would develop. At present he was little more than a beginner, earning his ten pounds a week and glad to get it: but, judging by the thoroughness of his methods, he might go far; he had the makings in him. As for the rest, the big names, the fancy money-makers, they were showmen, not illusionists. They bought their tricks ready-made from Morritt or some other inventor, and dressed up their acts with Chinese costumes and elaborate properties. Why, he had even heard that The Great Bezique was getting a thousand a week. Preposterous! Take away his mechanical arrangements, his flair for showmanship, and where was he? Set him in front of a curtain, in plain evening dress, and he would be helpless. But then, so was anybody else these days, who had nothing but skill to offer. Audiences didn't want it.

De Kolta, perhaps, he granted, deserved his success. Yet would he ever be able to repeat the cleverness of his *Femme Enlevée*, which had startled the profession a few years ago in Paris? There was a certain limit to these spectacular illusions. You might keep one for years; but

if the secret got out (as how could one expect that it wouldn't with so many carpenters and accomplices in the know?), then where were you? Left wishing you knew a bit more of the real thing, the genuine stuff, the basic skill which was now so contemptuously dismissed as "parlor magic."

Parlor magic, indeed! Mr. Morton sighed. Should he, or should he not, buy that barrel effect which Bellamy had offered him? It was a good trick, but Bellamy had worked it for years: it was not worth ten pounds, and the fellow was asking twenty. And why had Bellamy been so anxious to sell it? He had looked queer, decidedly; had said he was cracking up, was going to retire; but was it worth paying so much for a trick to a man who had finished with it?

Mr. Morton looked pessimistically into the future, and was not pleased with it. It was a long time since he had made a hundred a week; seventy, or even fifty nowadays, was more like it. And for how many weeks in the year could he count on engagements? He had been at the Egyptian Hall only once in the past twelve months, and was glad enough to get a fortnight's booking in any suburban palace of variety. And the trouble was, at his age, that things did not get better. If you were going downhill at over fifty you kept on going. There was no climbing back to the top once you had slipped off it. Not, that is, unless you were prepared to pay, and pay heavily, for what you couldn't do yourself; buy your way into this new world of showmanship which modern taste demanded. Yet that was precisely what he could not afford; and without a thousand pounds' worth of mechanical illusions, without a van-load of expensive properties, without Chinese robes and Hindu boys and a couple of five-pound-a-week grinning girls in tights, he might just as well expect to hold an audience by taking rabbits out of a hat.

Besides, that had never been his style. He, Majo the Magnificent, had always made a point of dignified simplicity. Twenty, or even fifteen years ago, an illusionist of skill, with a fine presence, faultless evening suit and a gardenia in his buttonhole, had had all an audience could possibly require of him. On that basis he had built his personality and molded his act. It was too late to change.

The cab swung carefully into Green Street, and Mr. Morton noticed with disgust that it was beginning to rain. Monday night, and wet: hardly a combination to raise one's spirits. In the greenish lamplight, faintly thickened already with wisps of fog, the streets looked brown

and greasy. It was the sort of night when cab horses fell down as soon as look at you: he must allow plenty of time for getting to the theater.

Suddenly he jerked forward and stared intently at a child standing on the edge of the pavement, and the next moment had pushed up the trap and was shouting to the driver. The horse slid a little on the road, then recovered itself, and the cab drew into the curb. Mr. Morton jumped down and ran back along the pavement.

"Emma! I thought it *couldn't* be you! What on earth are you doing here at this time of night?" For answer Emma burst into a flood of tears and Mr. Morton lifted her in his arms.

"Are you lost? Is that it? But what in the world are you doing out here alone? Where's your mother?"

Seeing that she made no answer, but clung sobbing to his shoulder, he carried her back to the cab, aware of the curious glances of passers-by.

"Wait a minute," he said to the driver, "I know this little girl, and I think she's lost herself." He deposited her on the padded seat, from which her thin legs dangled. "Now," he said soothingly, "tell me all about it."

Emma was too exhausted and frightened to be coherent, but between sobs he managed to distinguish that she was out alone, that she was lost, that in despair she had asked the way to his theater, and that she had had no dinner.

"Good God," said Mr. Morton, "but you must have walked miles! D'you mean to say they'll have been looking for you all this time?" Emma nodded miserably into his handkerchief. "Well, never mind about that now. The thing is to get you home."

He hesitated a moment, half in and half out of the cab. It was difficult to know what to do. The journey to Brixton and back could scarcely be accomplished under two hours, especially on a wet night; he was due in the theater at half-past eight, and did not fancy the idea of sending her alone in the hansom. Perhaps after all the best thing would be to take her to the theater, and drive home with her when the act was over, about ten o'clock.

He gave instructions to the cabman, who touched up his horse gingerly and set off. They drove in silence, for Emma was at the point of collapse, and was glad to lie against his coat without speaking, her legs swinging loosely to the jolting motion. He carried her into the theater, pausing only to ask the stage-door keeper to find him a mes-

senger and then send out for some supper, and climbed the stairs to his dressing room.

He was not yet expected, and the room was dark. He lit the gas, exclaiming at the cold, set Emma in the only comfortable chair and covered her with his overcoat. Then he sat down at the dressing table to write a note to Mrs. Shardiloe. "Have found Emma," he wrote; "she is safe and well and I will bring her home after the show." A messenger had by this time been found, and he sent him off with instructions to take a cab, and keep the change out of the sovereign.

Then he turned his anxious attention to the child. Were her feet wet? Did she feel all right? Was she quite sure she wasn't feverish? He took off her boots and chafed her cold feet with a towel; then brought a small oilstove from a corner and placed it beside her. "We'll soon have some supper inside you," he said, "and then you'll feel better."

Supper, when it came, was not what Emma was used to, since the stage-door keeper's imagination had risen no higher than mutton chops and stout; but for this very reason, perhaps, and because she was fast reviving in the delight of safety and Mr. Morton's presence, she ate what he gave her with some appearance of appetite, picking the lean meat off the bone with her teeth, as he did, her dress protected by a dirty towel. The stout she would not touch, so Mr. Morton sent out for a glass of hot milk, and made her drink it with the addition of sugar and brandy. She swallowed it obediently, and began to feel warmer; her color, which was never brilliant, crept back into her cheeks, and fatigue and misery gave way to the excitement of finding herself alone with Mr. Morton, and in a theater.

She looked round the tiny dressing room with interest. It was ugly, untidy and dirty, and this surprised her. The walls, which had once been whitewashed, were stained and bare; there were only two chairs in the room, and the only light was a naked jet over the dressing table. The dressing table itself was littered with pots of pomade and sticks of grease paint, letters, soiled handkerchiefs and dirty cups and saucers; and the whole presented a most surprising background to Mr. Morton's habitual elegance. The only things which seemed to have anything to do with him were a collection of properties arranged in careful order against the wall—a small gold table on spindly legs, a silver hoop, a drum, a bouquet of artificial roses in a paper sheath, a velvet cloth, an iron-bound chest with false sides lying candidly open, a long white veil hanging from a peg, a wand, a large black cone covered with mysterious

symbols, and a number of boxes and baskets whose contents she could not guess. From another peg, partly covered by a sheet, hung Mr. Morton's imposing evening suit, its artificial gardenia a little awry. He examined this anxiously as soon as he had finished his beer, satisfying himself that it had been brushed and pressed, and blew some specks of dust off the gardenia.

"Now, my dear," he said, when he had looked over his apparatus, and run through several packs of cards which he took out of a box, "I've got to get ready soon, so you'd better tell me now all about this adventure." He turned his chair from the dressing table to face her.

Emma hesitated, and then told him, rather piteously, that she had been sent home from school for having a mouse in her desk. Mr. Morton smiled.

"Doing a little conjuring, were you?" he said.

"Yes," said Emma, pleased with this interpretation and smiling back at him.

"Well, what then? How did you get to Green Street?"

"I got lost," said Emma, carefully weighing what she would tell and what she would conceal; "I thought I'd go a new way home, as it was so early; but I went too far, and then I couldn't find the road again."

"Yes, yes, I see: but why didn't you ask somebody?"

"I did," said Emma steadily, "but she must have told me wrong, because I went over a bridge. Then a very rough boy spoke to me, and I got frightened, and went on. And then I remembered the theater you were at, and asked a lady."

"Well," said Mr. Morton, getting up and taking off his coat, "it's a mercy I found you, though I can't for the life of me imagine why you didn't ask a policeman. However, all's well that ends well, as they say, though I'm afraid your mother will have been pretty well out of her mind. She'll just about have got my message, though, by now. My word, she'll be glad to see you."

Emma said nothing, being not so sure. She was, however, certain of a sensational welcome, and as Mr. Morton's presence would be an insurance against the worst forms of recrimination she was fairly content. She would be important and wept over, a heroine; more precious to her parents, for the time being, than Lily; the disgrace intended by Miss Wetherby was already defeated. Even Jesus, she reflected, watching with interest while Mr. Morton changed his trousers and in shirt

and braces set about his make-up, even Jesus was more delighted with a lost lamb recovered than with ninety and nine smug ones.

Time in the dressing room passed all too rapidly. By eight o'clock the room had become reasonably warm and smelled of paraffin, and there seemed to be a great many people in the theater. Some of them put their heads round Mr. Morton's door to have a word with him, and when they saw Emma came in and spoke to her with jovial kindness. One of these visitors, a thin lanky comedian in a battered top hat and a suit of clothes much too small for him, rather alarmed her; but he had serious dark eyes which she found friendly, and he seemed quite unconscious of his odd appearance. "Goin' to spring 'er out of a tifter, are you, Major?" he asked, collapsing his tall length to crouch beside Emma's chair and taking her hand in his, which was covered with a huge white cotton glove with flapping fingers; "she'd panic 'em all right with that funny little face, an' you could squeeze 'er into a pill-box."

Presently a boy brought in a hamper containing three white ducks, which he packed methodically into a shallow compartment at the bottom of the drum. They looked at Emma with beady eyes before the boy pressed down their heads and fastened the trap.

"There's some friends of yours in the house tonight," said Mr. Morton, combing his mustache carefully in front of the mirror. "They'll be in in a minute, I expect, to have a look at you."

The boy went out again, carrying an armful of Mr. Morton's properties, and as the door swung open Emma heard a prolonged and distant "Ta-ra-ra-a-a!" from a brassy orchestra, and in a minute the Four Godfreys trooped into the room. The young men looked splendid and unfamiliar in flesh-colored tights and spangled trunks; they were breathing heavily and their faces running with sweat. The sisters, a little grotesque in grease paint but equally glittering, with wreaths of artificial roses on their heads and tunics almost as abbreviated as their brothers', crowded round Emma with cries of shrill surprise, and Miss Clarice gave her a small screw of peppermints.

"Here, eat these up, they'll do you good," she said. "Nice for the breath, too," she added irrelevantly.

Emma sucked her peppermints and said nothing. She was amazed and happy. Nothing that had ever happened to her had been as interesting as this, and she watched Mr. Morton and the Godfreys with solemn eyes, fearful of missing anything.

Presently the boy returned, accompanied by two men in shirt sleeves, who carried away the rest of Mr. Morton's apparatus.

"Five minutes, Mr. Majo," said the boy, "Mr. Chirgwin's just goin' into 'is last number."

Mr. Morton put on his coat and rubbed his hands, flexing and stretching the fingers as Mrs. Shardiloe did when she was preparing to attack something particularly difficult on the piano. Then, telling Emma that she must not move and that he would not be long, he followed the Godfreys.

Left to herself, Emma gave way to the drowsiness which for the last few minutes had made it difficult to keep her eyes open. The brandy had spread a pleasant warmth through her body, and with her feet on a basket and her knees covered by Mr. Morton's coat, she was deliciously comfortable. She was fast asleep when he returned, and hardly stirred when, having removed his make-up and changed his clothes, he carried her out to a cab. She slept undisturbed in his arms all the way to Brixton.

In Mrs. Shardiloe the first reaction of fear was usually hysteria; the second was anger. She had reached this latter stage some hours before the cab crawled up the drive, and was sitting up with her husband and mother in the drawing room, waiting to vent on Emma the fury which she felt she deserved for having frightened her. Lily had brought the news at lunch-time that Emma had been sent home in disgrace in the middle of the morning, and was surprised to find that she had not yet arrived; Bessie, sent round several times to Miss Swanston's in the course of the afternoon, had brought no further information. Mrs. Shardiloe had worked herself into a state of frenzy, in which fear and self-reproach for past severity had in turn presented her imagination with every variety of horror. Mr. Morton's note had produced a crisis of tears. From that moment, knowing that the child was safe, and guessing that her disappearance had been due to naughtiness, she had begun to get angry, and by the time that Mr. Morton rang the bell she was quivering with indignation for what she had suffered.

The sight, however, of the child being carried in apparently unconscious revived all her apprehensions, and before she had discovered that Emma was asleep Mr. Morton had silenced her with a gesture.

"She's all right," he said, "only absolutely exhausted. I shouldn't wake her if I were you. We can probably get her to bed without doing that."

Emma did, indeed, wake only once during the process, but had the sense to shut her eyes again, and was put into warm blankets to an accompaniment of whispers. Mrs. Shardiloe then hurried downstairs to hear Mr. Morton's account of the adventure, and, when she had done exclaiming, to give him in return a dramatic relation of all the strange things that had happened in the house since she had last seen him.

There had been growing in Mrs. Shardiloe's mind a conviction that Emma was in some way connected with these mysteries; not, she said, in the way of being directly responsible, since even Tom had had to admit that that was impossible; but through some queer, unexplained faculty that had to do with "influences." She was not, she pointed out, a normal child; she was delicate; she walked in her sleep; she suffered, so her mother believed, from nightmares; and now there was this queer business of finding her at the corner of Leicester Square when she had been sent home from Miss Swanston's. And another thing, said Mrs. Shardiloe, leaning earnestly forward and emphasizing what she said by tapping her knee, another thing was that these strange occurrences took place only when Emma was in the house, though she had clearly not been responsible, and had, indeed, been kept as far as possible from any knowledge of them.

"Nellie," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "knows more about these things than I do, and *Nellie* says it must be a kind of possession. She read about a case once, somewhere abroad, I can't for the life of me remember where at the moment, which was much worse than this, of course, but the same kind of thing. The people simply had to leave the house. And all because, as they proved afterwards, there was a child in the family which was under some sort of *influence*."

Mr. Morton sipped his brandy and smiled.

"But do you really believe in that kind of nonsense?"

"Well," said Mrs. Shardiloe, throwing herself back in her chair, "I'm not a fool, I hope! Not *quite* a fool, whatever you may think to the contrary. And I've got to believe the evidence of my own eyes, haven't I?"

"Have you?" said Mr. Morton. "Forgive me if I seem rude, my dear, but you must remember that I am a professional illusionist."

"Yes, but Majo! This house isn't a variety stage. If you bring your props here and do a trick, as you've done once or twice in the past, I certainly shan't believe the evidence of my eyes, because I know there's a trick to it. But in my own house, under my very eyes, when pots and

pans start jumping off the shelf in full view of everybody, and my own brooch which was lost falls from nowhere when I'm alone in my room, and something hurls stones at my poor mother through closed windows and doors—well”—she broke off and sketched a despairing gesture with her hands, “what *are* you to believe?”

“It’s certainly very rum,” said Tom Shardiloe, bringing the weight of masculine judgment to bear. “I wouldn’t have said such a thing was possible myself, but there you are. I can’t account for it in any other way, and some people apparently say that these things *do* happen. Mind you,” he added, not wishing to associate himself completely with his wife’s convictions, “none of these things happened when *I* was about. So I’m not a fair witness.” His tone implied that it would take a courageous influence to meddle with *him*.

“H’m,” said Mr. Morton, “it’s queer, certainly.”

“Now, what d’you think we ought to do about it?” said Mrs. Shardiloe. “Nellie says I ought to consult a clergyman, but the fact of the matter is, I don’t know any. I’ve never had anything to do with that class of person, any more than you have, I dare say. I haven’t been to church since I was a child. Of course,” she went on, “there *is* a church in this very road, Congregational, I believe, and I dare say if I went and saw the minister, and perhaps gave a little subscription to something, because of course, not being a member of the congregation, he might not want to be bothered . . .”

“I shouldn’t,” said Mr. Morton. “After all, if it’s what you think, it’ll wear itself out. And if it isn’t, it’ll do the same thing. In any case I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“But Emma?” said Mrs. Shardiloe. “Don’t you think we ought to do something? It’s no good calling in Dr. Ashe; he’ll only say it’s liver, which, of course, may have something to do with it, for all I know, and certainly the poor child suffers cruelly from biliousness at times; but I can dose her for that as well as Dr. Ashe. What I feel she needs is a careful talking-to by someone who understands these things; but it’s so difficult, because for one thing we’ve kept it from her as much as possible, and for another she’s such an obstinate, secret sort of child; you can’t get anything out of her. I sometimes think there’s bad blood in her somewhere. Lily’s so utterly different, thank God. Utterly different.”

“If you like,” said Mr. Morton, wiping his mustache, “I’ll have a

talk with her myself. Say tomorrow morning, if that suits everybody. And now I really must be going. I know you're all worn out."

"Well, I should be grateful, really," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "though I don't know how to thank you enough for all you've done already. It turns me quite faint to think what might have happened if you hadn't seen her. I shan't close my eyes all night for thinking of it." She rose, and with a weary smile gave Mr. Morton her hand. "At least you'll have a bite of something before you go? A sandwich, perhaps? It wouldn't take a minute to toss you up something."

"No, really, Susan, thank you. It's so late."

"But you've had nothing since you left the theater," said Tom Shardiloe, "and there's a nice little length of liver sausage in the pantry, came from Appenrodts', and with some brown bread ——?"

"Well," said Mr. Morton, "well," and hesitated.

"Tom," said Mrs. Shardiloe in her tragedy voice, "I'm sorry to say it, but the liver sausage is finished. I was so upset this evening I had to get myself a little something to quiet me down. My nerves play me up so, and I know from experience that a bite of something often heads off an attack. However, there's some nice oxtail that could be hotted up in a minute."

"On second thoughts," said Mr. Morton, "I don't think I'd better take anything after that brandy, if it's all the same to you. I'll look in if I may in the morning. Good night, all." Deprived of her audience, there was nothing for Mrs. Shardiloe to do but go to bed, which she soon did, yawning and shivering in front of the mirror and scratching herself reflectively as she removed her corsets.

Somewhat to Mrs. Shardiloe's disappointment, Mr. Morton conducted his examination in private. She had taken it for granted that she would sit at the bedside, soothing, prompting and encouraging, and had been careful to be up and dressed by ten o'clock, in a gray silk gown with a high lace vest, threaded and bunched with yards of purple baby ribbon. Mr. Morton, however, insisted on seeing Emma alone, and went up with thoughtful tread to the child's bedroom.

Emma was in the first stages of a severe cold, the result of wet feet and the previous day's exhaustion, and her face was luminously pale, shining with a liberal application of tallow. She was muffled in shawls and unusually subdued. Mr. Morton sat down with a cheerful air at the bedside.

"Been doing any conjuring lately?" he asked her, when he had in-

quired about her cold, her night's rest, and her general recovery from her adventure. Emma shook her head.

"What? Haven't you even practiced those things I showed you? I call that ungrateful."

"Well, I have a little," Emma admitted, "but I'm not very good yet. I can tie the bow, though."

"Splendid," said Mr. Morton. "Let's see you do it."

He produced a thin piece of cord from his pocket, and after one or two bungling attempts Emma managed it neatly.

"That's it," said Mr. Morton approvingly; "now for the ha'penny."

This she did at once, palming the coin and then producing it again several times, with only one fiasco. She had evidently been practicing more than she said.

"Why, that's splendid!" said Mr. Morton, warming her with a smile, so that she lost her first suspicion and became pleased and confident; "we shall make a magician out of you in no time. I shall have to take you on as my assistant."

"I should like that," said Emma, remembering the theater with pleasure; "I could look after the ducks."

"So you could," said Mr. Morton. "You could help me with my tricks, and perhaps invent some new ones. Have you ever tried to think out some of your own?"

"No," said Emma, and dropped her eyes.

"Well, you ought to. It's all part of the game. You could try them on your parents for a start, or your grandmother, or Bessie, couldn't you?"

"Yes," said Emma in a whisper.

"People like being mystified, you know. Don't you think so?"

Emma did not answer, and began picking at the border of hem-stitching on the sheet.

"Provided, of course," he went on, "you do nothing to frighten them. No good magician would ever do that. It wouldn't please a magician to frighten people. He would think it beneath him."

Emma said nothing.

"Even with the kind of illusions that seem frightening at first, he always takes care to show them that it's really all right. Sawing a lady in half, for instance. That would be a dreadful thing to do if the audience believed it. That's why he always shows her again imme-

diately, perfectly whole and well. They appreciate him all the more when they know it's just his cleverness—nothing but a trick."

Emma pulled up the edge of the sheet to study it more closely, and Mr. Morton drew a case out of his pocket and lit a small cigar.

"Even the simplest magic," he said, "would be alarming if it happened when you were not expecting it, or if you arranged it so that people thought it was true. Even something comparatively harmless; like, for instance, stones dropping out of the air, or pots and pans jumping off shelves, or brooches disappearing." He fussed a little with his cigar, not looking at Emma. "If you say to somebody, 'Now I will show you a trick,' and then do it, they will probably enjoy it, especially if it's a good one. But if you arrange it so that they think it's been done by something else—well, I don't believe in ghosts myself, or any of that rubbish, but some people do—they are certain to get very upset and frightened. You would yourself, now, wouldn't you?"

Emma nodded without speaking, and then, after glancing hesitatingly at the foot of the bed, and at the window, and at everything in the room except Mr. Morton, met his eyes. He was gazing at her inquiringly.

"Mr. Morton, I didn't do it," she said in a low voice; "do they think I did?"

"N-no," said Mr. Morton. "Your mother's not altogether certain, I think. But I am, of course. I know you wouldn't do anything so unkind. It isn't in your character."

Emma said nothing for a long time, struggling between suspicion and relief. At length she said: "If Mother thought I did it, she'd be dreadfully angry."

"She would," said Mr. Morton, "and quite right, too. I should be myself. However, as you didn't, we needn't talk about it any longer. What I really came to see you for was to show you how to work that trick with the cigar case. In fact, I've even brought a little one that you can keep."

He brought out a small pocket case filled with property cigars, and holding his head sideways so that the smoke of his own cigar should not go in his eyes, showed her the simple secret of its inner compartment.

Downstairs in the back sitting room, Mrs. Shardiloe was setting out biscuits and a decanter of sherry. She was wishing she could think of

an excuse for dismissing her mother, but Mrs. Hignett had seen the glasses and the biscuit barrel, and was intent on her crochet. Mrs. Shardiloe sighed, and wandered absently about the room, straightening cushions, making minute adjustments in the positions of ornaments. Finally she went out into the hall, and was hesitating with her fingers on the banisters when Mr. Morton came leisurely down the staircase.

"Well?" she said, raising her fine eyebrows.

Mr. Morton put his hand over hers and gave it a squeeze.

"Susan, I don't think there's anything at all to worry about."

"What makes you think that?" said Mrs. Shardiloe quickly, opening her blue eyes very wide and leaving her hand negligently where it was. She was not sure that she wanted to relinquish these absorbing anxieties so easily.

"Well," said Mr. Morton, "if any more of these funny things happen, I should just take no notice. Things of that kind only thrive so long as you're interested. It'll stop soon enough, you'll find, if you'll say no more about it."

"But Emma," said Mrs. Shardiloe, withdrawing her hand and looking faintly disappointed, "didn't you get anything out of her?"

"Susan," said Mr. Morton, "I must be going immediately, but you did mention sherry? A glass of that excellent East Indian sherry of yours, now . . ."

"Yes, of course," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "it's ready and waiting. I'll join you in a glass. But you were saying, about the child?"

"The child," said Mr. Morton, briefly examining his conscience and guiltily palming it like an egg or a penny, "oh yes; Emma. My dear Susan, that child is sensitive far above the average, but I'm sure she had nothing deliberately to do with it."

Chapter IV

(1898)

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IN THE SPRING OF 1898 LILY SHARDILOE CELEBRATED her twenty-first birthday, and became engaged. She was delighted that the two events should so nearly coincide, for to have reached the one without achieving the other was her private criterion of failure. One or two of her friends were already married; had been stamped with the seal of success at nineteen or twenty; and Lily had wept angrily and in secret over these triumphant weddings.

Now, however, she was as good as they; indeed better, for in accepting young Mr. Leonard Webster she was doing what her mother called "marrying money and class," and she looked forward to the importance of the married state with a kind of rapture. This rapture she was careful to conceal from her betrothed, to whom she was often capricious and sometimes rude; behavior designed to teach him his amazing luck, and to make him humble and anxious with the fear of losing her. "If I was Leonard I'd box your ears," Mr. Shardiloe told her, when some pert snub or open mockery had made Leonard blush to the very edge of his collar, causing Mrs. Shardiloe to glance quickly across the table to see how he had taken it. But Lily only tossed her head, pleased with herself and looking prettier than ever; and then, if she thought that perhaps she had gone too far, smoothed Leonard's ruffled self-respect with smiles and flattery.

Delight in her prize made her a little reckless, for Leonard Webster was all that she could desire. He was good-looking, he dressed like a gentleman, and he had the security and importance of J. Webster & Sons behind him. One day, when his father died, he would inherit the shop—that big conservative draper's in Brixton High Street where Lily and Emma had bought their glove buttons, ribbons and odds and ends ever since they were children; and it was generally agreed among those who knew him that old Mr. Webster was worth a nice bit of money. Added to this, the young man was deeply in love, and wooed

her with an attentive deference which made it exquisite flattery to be seen in his company. The alacrity with which he sprang to open doors, the solicitude with which he placed her chair or passed her the sugar, acted on Lily like a gentle intoxication, warming her into a glow of self-approval.

At twenty-one she was as pretty as Mrs. Shardiloe had been, and even more preoccupied with her appearance. She was tall and slender, with an abundance of soft fair hair loosely brushed up from her face and coiled in a little knot on top of her head. In middle age, like her mother, she was perhaps doomed to majestic and inescapable flesh, but now she possessed just that willowy slenderness which was the dream of all female perfection, and the styles of the day seemed designed expressly to display her. Frilled and ribboned blouses, foaming up to the chin with frivolous ornament, sleek skirts that fitted without a wrinkle over the hips and kicked off into flutes and flounces around the ankles, petticoats so loaded with lace that a whole art was devoted to their provocative management, might all have been invented for Lily's benefit. If she had been a rich woman her wardrobe would have been costly and elaborate, her jewelry imposing; but since the Shardiloes were now somewhat less comfortably off than before, and her pocket money was too modest to deserve the name of dress-allowance, her whole energy, ever since leaving school, had been turned to the creation of a scraped and contrived elegance.

Aunt Nellie, teased and ignored during impatient childhood, had now become chief confidante and friend, her workbasket and sewing machine having purchased a regard which no other attributes could have won her. The skill which had once gone into Grandma's caps (and what confections they had been—growing more and more bizarre in her later years until she had been crowned with quivering little masterpieces of aigrettes, jet ornaments, butterflies and spangles) was now devoted to the creation of Lily's millinery, great hats extravagantly heaped with tulle and roses, with birds' wings, velvet bows and artificial apple-blossoms, speared to her coiled hair with deadly hatpins. Her blouses and petticoats, too, were in themselves a whole domestic industry, involving days of labor in the stitching and gathering of lace, when Miss Fairey would rock almost ceaselessly at her treadle sewing machine, and Lily, cross and disheveled from continual trying-on, could hardly be coaxed from the back sitting room even for meals. She spent long secret evenings shut in her bedroom, absorbed in pins

and pads and curling tongs, experimenting with little pots of rouge and powder which the advertisements in the ladies' magazines guaranteed undetectable. Her gloves, her open-work stockings and her shoes were shrewdly bought and jealously preserved, her corsets were the object of close concern.

Such a vast expense of trouble was presumably justified, since she emerged in the finished state a considerable beauty, and had secured Leonard. Mrs. Shardiloe was delighted. She had been right, after all, in discouraging Lily from a professional career; those schoolgirl talents had never advanced beyond the drawing room, and now, in the prospect of a good marriage, she was assured of something infinitely better. As the girls had grown up Mrs. Shardiloe had become increasingly refined in her ambitions; her own theatrical adventures could be invested with a sentimental bloom, but they were safely in the past. She saw them now in the light of rapturous successes, from which sordid family cares had cruelly snatched her; but some smothered recollections of reality made her prefer a safer and less arduous course for both her daughters. Lily had turned out to be a beauty and had done well for herself; she only hoped that Emma would follow her example.

Emma, however, caused her some misgiving. She was a queer girl, at nineteen already outside her mother's experience; a moody, intimidating, unpredictable creature who could display a melting sort of charm whenever it pleased her, but who required careful handling. She had such moods, such an odd temper, such an air of being secretly different from the rest of them and of jealously insisting on that difference, that it was hard to prophesy how she would develop. She had established, through this singularity of hers, an importance that was as uncomfortable as it was unexpected; you had to be very careful not to upset her. Where she got it from Mrs. Shardiloe could not imagine. She would, she thought, stand out in any family. Those dreams of hers, for instance, were very queer; and there were several things about her that were out of the ordinary. She had known ever since she was a child that Emma was odd, but it was an oddness that made you uneasy. You never knew what turn she would take next. As a child she had seemed somehow connected with those strange occurrences which had never been explained, and she had since given evidences of a power which was beyond the normal.

The vision she had had at the time of Grandma's death had perhaps been the strangest. Grandma at long last had received her expected

stroke; three years, to be precise, since that mysterious "warning"; and had been lying paralyzed and speechless in her bed for the best part of a fortnight. After the first fright they had none of them thought that she would die; she was so tough; she clung, though silent and immovable, with such tenacity to life that the Shardiloes were already more or less resigned to the tedious burden, grumbling among themselves at this last grotesque trick which age had played. And then, the night before Grandma had suddenly and obligingly died, Emma, on her way to bed, had seen on the landing the figure of an elderly man who had gazed at her with a sort of mild surprise, and without a word disappeared into Grandma's bedroom. There had been no doubt, from the girl's description, that this was old Mr. Hignett. The lean face, the beard, the spectacles, all tallied; and even if Mrs. Shardiloe herself had not remembered him (which of course she did), there was the evidence of the daguerreotype in the drawing room. Whether Grandma herself had seen him no one knew, for she could neither speak nor move, and might have observed a whole procession of specters as she lay solitary in her room, her eyes helplessly bright over the edge of the blanket. But the next day she had died, and Emma's vision, breathlessly described with convincing wildness of gesture, became doubly significant. Not only did it prove beyond doubt (as Mrs. Shardiloe herself had never doubted) the existence of ghosts, but also that Emma possessed the power of seeing them.

This power, though she acknowledged it, she would not discuss, and was wise enough to display extremely rarely. Her visions amounted in all to only two or three, and, except for the one which had concerned Grandma, were of no special significance. Yet, Mrs. Shardiloe wondered, who was to say whether they were significant or not? That child seen playing on a swing in the garden one winter afternoon, where there was neither swing nor child; the dog which, as Emma declared, had run past her on the stairs, years after Floss and Gyp were in their graves—what was one to think of them? They might mean something, and then again they might not; there was no awful and accidental confirmation, as in ghost stories. Emma simply flung them like fireworks into the family, without warning and at extremely long intervals; and when she had sufficiently amazed everybody retired again into that curious reserve of hers, so complete that it was impossible to get anything out of her. She had, by this very behavior, made a position for herself in the family which not even Lily could chal-

lenge. Lily was the obvious success, the beauty; but Emma possessed something which refused to be ignored. She seemed to be constantly exacting a special tribute—not to her beauty, for that was Lily's preserve, and beyond competition, but to those mysterious inner qualities which distinguished her from the rest.

Had Mrs. Shardiloe known it, this difference was as carefully nourished as a tender plant, much prized and dwelled upon, a bud from the jealous desire for attention which had tormented her childhood. Longing had forced and envy of Lily fed it, until, thrusting out from the normal course of adolescence, it had developed through cautious experiment into a luxuriant tangle of self-deception and vanity, a strange and supporting growth. It supplied compensation for many of Lily's monopolies; soothed disappointment and bestowed a value which was at least her own; disguised self-dissatisfaction and put a more interesting face on dull shortcomings; and if by its slightly sinister tinge it set her ever more sharply apart from this admired sister, it enjoyed its own triumphs and its own rewards.

Regarding Lily, Emma was divided between admiration and envy. It was impossible not to take pleasure in her prettiness; equally impossible not to feel cheated that this prettiness was a thing she could not share. She was fascinated by Lily's feminine preoccupations, and at the same time exasperated; drawn into confidences of absorbing intimacy, and then hurriedly throwing up the barriers of scorn, refusing any longer to be beguiled. "You think of nothing but men!" she would say coldly, at the end of some bedroom colloquy which had kept them awake long past midnight. And then, when Lily, offended, had turned uncommunicative, "But tell me more."

Lily's young men were the heroes of a serial saga culminating in Leonard. She never went out, even if it were only to the grocer's, without having some adventure to relate when she came home. This one had followed her in the street; that one had given her a meaning look and raised his hat; the chemist's assistant had managed to touch her wrist when he picked up her handkerchief. The brothers of those school friends whom she still saw (it was significant that she had kept up acquaintance only with those who had brothers) were all dying of love for her, and she delighted to tell Emma how obviously they had wanted to see her home, and how they had secretly pressed her foot under the table.

Dolly Webster had been the most valuable of Lily's friends, since,

though she had died not long after leaving school, she had bequeathed her Leonard. Ever since she had first met him Lily had been a regular customer at Websters', careful to go there only when looking her best. A new blouse, a summer hat gay with Aunt Nellie's bows and artificial posies, always produced a sudden need for glove buttons or hairpins, for a dozen yards of lace or a card of elastic; and Lily, looking as lovely as a rose and elaborately nonchalant, would stroll down on the shady side of the road and disappear into the coolness of Websters' shop. There she would linger, reflectively feeling materials between finger and thumb, taking an unconscionable time over hooks and eyes and baby ribbon, drawing idle patterns on the floor with the point of her sunshade while the shop assistant made out the bill and waited for the change to come sighing back to his hand along the overhead wires; and sooner or later it always happened that young Mr. Webster came out of the office at the back of the shop, hesitant and smiling. "Are they looking after you properly, Miss Shardiloe?"

Sometimes, too, old Mr. Webster would come out and greet her, looking absently past her in the disconcerting way that he had, stroking his tobacco-stained beard with restless fingers; and occasionally, because she had been a friend of his daughter's, he would offer her tea. These office teas led to more intimate meetings ("Dolly's mother was saying she would like to see you, my dear") and Lily, in freshly ironed *broderie anglaise* and white kid gloves, would visit the big somber house which was not far from the Shardiloes', and spend the afternoon in politely agreeable talk with Mrs. Webster, carefully delaying her departure until Leonard came. Then the purpose of the visit would be achieved, for he would offer to see her home, and they would stroll together along the suburban roads, under the laburnum and pink hawthorn of front gardens, discussing the gardens and the weather with a calm air of indifference and decorum: and all the time silently inviting, delicately skirmishing without a word spoken, secretly putting forth tendrils of inquiry.

One night, after an evening of whist at the Websters', Lily came home late, and without looking to see if her mother were still downstairs, went directly to Emma's room. Emma was reading in bed by candlelight, alert for her return. She perceived instantly Lily's air of excitement and importance, and guessed its reason, but she dropped her eyes again to her book as though she had seen nothing.

"You're late," she said. "I was just going to blow out the light." She turned a page and read on deliberately, frowning.

"It's only just gone eleven," said Lily lightly, unpinning her hat and seeming pleased with herself. "I thought I might as well look in and say good night." She went to the dressing table and lit the candles, peering at herself in the glass with a kind of wonder. So that was how one looked when one had just been proposed to. She leaned her elbows on the crochet mat and stared earnestly in the mirror.

"Well?" said Emma, after a pause in which she had tried, and failed, to smother curiosity; "what sort of a time did you have?"

"Oh, nothing special. We played cards. Leonard proposed on the way home, that was the only thing. I thought he was going to."

Emma looked up quickly from her book and then returned to it.

"I thought you looked stuck up about something," she said. She turned a page crisply.

Lily spun round from the dressing table and came and sat on the bed.

"Oh, Em, you are a pig. You're not a bit pleased."

"Yes, I am," said Emma, resignedly abandoning her book; "only I thought you didn't want to tell me. What did he say? I suppose you've accepted him?"

"Not exactly," said Lily. "He rather sprang it on me. I said I must have time to think."

"Rubbish," said Emma, "when you've been thinking about nothing else for the past two months. Are you actually engaged?"

Lily stretched herself deliberately on the coverlet and propped her head on her hand.

"Well, in a way I suppose I am. I didn't say no. On the other hand, I wasn't going to jump at him. I've seen it coming for weeks, but naturally I didn't let on. I said he could come round on Sunday, and I'd give him an answer." She examined her fingernails thoughtfully, smiling to herself. She had almost arrived at the moment when she could drop pretense and enjoy the even greater luxury of confidence. Sensing this, Emma moved her knees irritably under the bedclothes.

"Well, go on. Do stop showing off and tell me what really happened."

"There's nothing to tell, really," said Lily maddeningly, enjoying herself.



"Or course there is! Are you in love with him? Did he kiss you?"

"He did," said Lily, smiling at the ceiling. "And I am. Satisfied?"

Emma looked at her with admiration and annoyance. Fancy having an experience like that and being able to resist the impulse to relate it! But Lily would say more, as she well knew. It was only a question of waiting, and pretending indifference. She picked up her book.

"Oh Em, don't read when I want to talk to you. I want your advice. I'm so happy I couldn't possibly go to sleep. I wonder if I ought to have said yes right away? Supposing he's miserable? Supposing he changes his mind?"

"Yes," said Emma nastily, "supposing he does that?"

"Ah, but he won't," said Lily, whose supposition had been purely rhetorical. "He's madly in love with me. I could tell that when he kissed me."

"What was it like?" Emma was openly curious.

"Oh. I don't know. Wonderful. I still get a sort of shiver whenever I think of it." This was true, though Leonard's embrace, anguished and somehow unmanageable because of Lily's hat and his own breathing, had been anything but polished. Ardor there had been, however, and triumph and anxiety, and Lily had been aware of all these things, and the physical memory of them still intoxicated her.

"What did he actually say when he proposed? How did he put it?"

"He said, quite suddenly when we got to the gate, 'Lily, I've been trying to say something all the way home. Don't you know what it is?' "

"And I suppose you said you didn't?"

"Well, of course. How could I?"

"Naturally, how could you?" said Emma mockingly. "Miss Lily Shardiloe had no idea."

"Well," said Lily, laughing, "anyhow, then he said, 'I've been trying to tell you that I love you.' And then he took my hand and just said, 'Oh, Lily!' Just like that. 'Oh, Lily!'"

"And what did you say?"

"I didn't say anything. I could have died."

"But you didn't," said Emma. "Miss Shardiloe showed remarkable presence of mind. Well, what happened next?"

"Then he said that his parents both liked me very much, and that it would make them all very happy if I would consider marrying him. So I said, 'Are you only doing this to please your parents?' I was

as cool as anything. And then he said, 'Lily,' he said, 'I love you so much that I don't know what I shall do if you refuse me. I don't know what I shall do.'"

"He could always blow his brains out," said Emma.

"Hush, don't be horrible," said Lily, though obviously rather fancying the suggestion. "So then I said I would think it over, and if he came to tea on Sunday I would give him an answer."

"How awful," said Emma. "He'll be so embarrassed, and we shall all have to think of different excuses for going out of the room. I shall listen at the keyhole."

"If you do I'll kill you," said Lily absently. "Look, I've been thinking about my wedding dress. I shall go to Miss Blake, I think. There's no sense in skimping over a thing like that; it'd be bound to look home-made. Aunt Nellie ought to be able to manage the wreath and veil, though. Probably better than anybody."

She drifted off into minute considerations of wedding garments and trousseau, bemoaning the fact that she would almost certainly be given too little money to do the thing properly.

"Mother'll stand up for you," said Emma; "she'll want a good splash as much as you do. Have you seen her yet?"

"No. I came straight upstairs. I'll go and see if she's still awake."

"No, don't do that," said Emma, catching her hand with unaccustomed affection. "I'd like to be the only one to know."

They parted in friendly fashion, Lily yawning and drawing the pins out of her hair as she went. Emma blew out the candle immediately and lay still.

The news had profoundly excited her, but now that she was alone its aspect was not so pleasant. For the moment she shared Lily's secret, and enjoyed a reflected importance as she had done long ago during the Christmas concerts at school, in which Lily had shone; but in the morning even this small distinction would be taken from her, and she would be pushed into the background, an insignificant spectator at her sister's triumph. This was the role she most disliked, and she could not remember the time when she had not resisted it. Her whole childhood had been harassed by competition, no less bitter for being only dimly understood. The odds had always been heavily in Lily's favor, but up to the present, by methods of her own, she had kept the balance. Against Lily's beauty she had set a false importance; as Lily had reaped admiration, so, by the skillful suggestion of other,

more mysterious qualities, she had made the score even. Lily might well be the pretty daughter, but she was the interesting one; the one who had to be handled carefully; the one who promised to discover hidden powers.

In a different environment and with another mind, Emma might have turned to arrogant intellectualism as her best weapon, have piled up certificates and examinations against Lily's lovers, and convinced herself that she despised what seemed outside her choice: but nothing in the Shardiloe environment suggested this solution: it would have received scant respect if she had attempted it, and such an arid and difficult course could never have attracted her. A mysterious short cut was more appealing than a sustained effort, and singularity fed her taste for drama. Knowing this, though without ever clearly examining either method or motive, she had built up a figure of herself which, by sheer weight of suggestion, did much to offset Lily's conventional advantage. She could bear a stranger's praise of Lily's beauty now that she knew that as soon as heads were turned and voices lowered Mrs. Shardiloe, having agreed, would add confidentially, "But Emma's the interesting one, you know. *She's psychic.*"

Now, however, with one effortless movement Lily had leaped ahead; so far, indeed, that it seemed useless to follow; and Emma lay staring at the accomplished fact for which in theory she had always been prepared, but which in practice she had never clearly expected. So Lily was going to be married. Lily had stood inside the gate, under the tasseled laburnum at the bottom of the drive, and received a proposal of marriage. Leonard Webster, object of giggling excitement to them both during the past five months, would be her husband. Already he was set apart and circumscribed; Lily's possession.

Emma herself had never entertained articulate ambitions concerning him; he was a young man, and therefore a target for their mocking curiosity; an adventure that occurred about every third Sunday, when he came to tea, and which could be shared by both of them. It had been obvious, of course, that it had been Lily who chiefly drew his admiration, but he had been agreeable and charming to everybody, so that jealousy had stirred only on the fringe of the acquaintance, an anxiety easily soothed by teasing Lily after he was gone, laughing at her careful preparations and fine manners, the bait she laid because she so evidently wanted him. By this teasing Lily could be made a little ridiculous; uncomfortable, too, by the implicit sug-

gestion that she might eventually fail. But she had not failed. Leonard had all that time been drawing deliberately nearer, and had now arrived where he had wished to be. He was Lily's at last.

Seen in this new character as Lily's lover, he arose in imagination with a stranger's face. What had he looked like, down there by the gate, mysterious in the summer dark, close, close to the pearly glimmer of Lily's muslin? That correct young face, changed by the anxious urgency of love, how had it appeared? Stirring restlessly on her pillow she tried hard to evoke his image in that moment, and found she could not. The only features memory would concede were Lily's; Lily's face, composed and luminous as a flower in the dusk; cool and inaccessible under her big summer hat; a virginal mask concealing under decorous surprise the exultation of her triumph.

Emma felt a sudden stir of anger, both with herself and Lily. By this calm advance Lily had somehow cheated her, but she should have been prepared. She should have had something ready, some move to bridge this lost ground at a stride: and she had nothing. Lily had outstripped her utterly, and she was helpless. To the smart of defeat and frustration came the comfort of tears, and for a time she cried childishly into her pillow. At length, suddenly fearful that Lily, wakeful and excited, might return for further confidences and find her crying, she forced herself to be calm; then was diverted by further speculations about Lily and Leonard; and fell asleep.

When Sunday came she was consumed with curiosity, and in the general tension forgot her own distress. Mrs. Shardiloe was in a fever of anxious pleasure, fussing over Lily, suggesting an egg shampoo and urging her to bathe her face and hands in milk before she went to bed, as though Leonard had got to be won all over again, and must at all costs be dazzled by physical perfection. "You're not engaged yet," she said, over and over again, "though of course you were quite right to put him off a little—suspense will be good for him. He must see you at your very best on Sunday." She behaved as though a definite engagement would put fetters on Leonard from which he could never escape, and by this rather annoyed Lily, who considered that escape was the last thing he would want in any circumstances. All the same she was infected by her mother's nervousness, and would gladly have submitted to a bath of asses' milk if it had been procurable. The two of them spent hours over her hair, her hands and even

her underclothes, and Aunt Nellie and Emma gave themselves up to these preparations, the one delightedly, the other with an equivocal air of resignation, ironing Lily's petticoats and brushing her hair as though it were the wedding ceremony itself for which they were grooming her.

The important day came at last, and the Shardiloes were hysterically keyed up for Leonard's arrival, like amateur players before the rise of the curtain. Miss Fairey fussed over the tea table as though she were preparing it for exhibition, and Lily and her mother constantly set each other off into gales of unexplained laughter. "I know I shan't be able to keep a straight face," said Mrs. Shardiloe, enjoying every minute; and Lily would reply, "Well, don't catch my eye, Mother, that's all I ask"; and then something would start them off again, and they would keep it up (a little artificially, Emma thought) until they were both out of breath and wiping their eyes on their handkerchiefs.

When Leonard arrived their social calm was so elaborate that Emma felt sorry for him. He looked smaller than she remembered, an insignificant fulfillment to these feverish dreams, and she found herself wondering whether, after all, there was any need to be jealous. He was, she noticed with surprise, barely taller than her mother, and a quite perceptible inch shorter than Lily. Greeting him, she was suddenly aware of her own height, and regretted what had previously been a source of pride, that they were all tall women. He looked better when he was talking to Miss Fairey, more reassuring still beside her mother. She decided that he appeared at his best when he was sitting down.

Envy reasserted itself, however, as she watched him—covertly, for she was now too intent on observing him to wish to draw his attention to herself—and her gaze wandered from him to Lily and back again during the whole of that unnaturally bright and conversational tea. He was worth having, certainly; such a pleasant smile, such good teeth, such an attractive way of bending his fair head as he listened to her mother, blond and imposing behind her silver kettle. He and Lily were clearly what would be called a handsome couple, and behind him, moreover, was the satisfying shadow of Websters', breathing drapery and money. Lily had made no mistake; that was quite evident. She had skillfully combined what was good for her with what she wanted.

After tea, when they had sat together for a polite interval in the drawing room, Miss Fairey and the Shardiloes excused themselves one by one to give Leonard his chance. Tom Shardiloe had a man to see about business, Aunt Nellie with unwonted conscience recalled that she had left her mother alone. Finally Mrs. Shardiloe, noting the shallow regret with which Leonard parted from them, and smiling to herself, sighed, straightened her dress, and said that she had promised to have that hamper of old clothes ready for the Salvation Army ready by six o'clock, and would Emma help her?

"Can I help you, too, Mother?" said Lily, playing her fish. But, "No, dear, certainly not; what would Leonard think of us?" said her mother; "you stay and talk to him, dear, and we'll be back presently." Then they went upstairs and sat on Mrs. Shardiloe's bed and smoked cigarettes.

"Well, I suppose it'll be you next, Emma. Soon your old mother will be left alone."

"I doubt it," said Emma, holding her cigarette between finger and thumb and sucking in the smoke with a frown of effort. "I don't think I shall ever marry."

"Rubbish," said Mrs. Shardiloe, taking this as a reflection on herself as a producer of marriageable daughters; "you're only nineteen, remember. You'll think differently in a year or two. You don't want to spend all your life at home."

"I shouldn't mind. I've always been happier at home than Lily has. You know that, Mother."

Mrs. Shardiloe did not know it, but she received the implied tribute with calm pleasure.

"You're a funny girl," she said, "I don't believe you're a bit jealous about Leonard."

"Why should I be? I don't want him. He's very nice for Lily, but it would take something very different to make me leave you and Father."

"Now don't you start running down Leonard," said Mrs. Shardiloe, up in arms at once for her favorite daughter; "he's a thoroughly nice young man, and will make Lily an excellent husband. The Websters are good class, you know, and very well off. I shouldn't be surprised if old Mr. Webster didn't live long, either."

"Oh, he's nice enough," said Emma, retrieving a false step. "What I meant was, I'm not really keen on getting married. Lily is and

always has been, but I'm not. I'm very happy with you. I should hate to leave you."

"Dear Em," said Mrs. Shardiloe, impulsively, taking her hand, and instantly seeing her as the affectionate, the home-loving daughter with an unobtrusive niceness of her own which perhaps even Lily did not possess. "Dear Em, we've always been friends, haven't we? I remember, when you were a little girl, it was always your mother you wanted . . ."

"I do still," said Emma, smiling and waving away the tobacco smoke with her hand, the better to observe her mother's face. After all, until something better presented itself, there was some comfort in stepping into the place which sooner or later Lily was bound to vacate. If Lily had sprung ahead, then advantage must somehow be squeezed from staying behind. The daughter at home would at least have a temporary pre-eminence, even if only in her mother's attention, which her sister had monopolized for so long; and this she would enjoy until the moment came when she no longer needed it. They went downstairs presently, arm in arm, when they heard Lily call, knit together in a new intimacy of affection.

The engagement was appropriately celebrated by a supper party at the Websters', Mrs. Shardiloe and Mrs. Webster having by this time exchanged polite visits and decided that they must make allowances for one another. Mrs. Webster thought Mrs. Shardiloe flashy, and deplored her theatrical past; she preferred the respectability of the surgical appliances. Considering these, Mr. Shardiloe could almost be said to be in the medical profession, and his years in suburban management decently ignored. "I'm sure your father must have been a very fine man," she told Mrs. Shardiloe, laying quiet stress on the aspect she preferred; "I remember Hignett's surgical appliances from a girl." Stifling an impulse to reply, "Indeed? And which did you have?" Mrs. Shardiloe threw herself into the part of bride's mother with professional gusto, and set about flattering Mrs. Webster with as much detached pride in her achievement as if she had been charming a snake. She did not like her, and since she herself was much worried by increasing flesh, observed with pleasure that Mrs. Webster was stouter. She was a slow, powerful and inflexible woman, unimaginable apart from her solid black clothing and gold jewelry; an unlikely creature, somehow, to have produced Leonard. Mrs. Shar-

diloe was secretly afraid of her. With Mr. Webster she was more at home, a man of propitiating if somewhat absent manner, who had promised to promote Leonard to a partnership as soon as he was married, and who had obviously taken an enormous fancy to Lily. "It's wonderful how she reminds me of our little daughter," he confided to Mrs. Shardiloe, gazing at her with anxious protuberant blue eyes and touching his beard nervously with his fingers. "Remarkable, the likeness is: really remarkable." Mrs. Shardiloe, who remembered Dolly Webster well enough, and who would have been outraged, had it come from anyone else, by the suggestion that she had at all resembled Lily, seriously agreed; and by continuing to marvel conversationally at the supposed resemblance established herself as a charming woman in Mr. Webster's opinion.

She had soon discovered that to talk about Dolly was the kindest thing she could do for either of the Websters. Dolly had been their only daughter, and by dying at the age of seventeen had removed herself beyond disappointment or criticism, into a realm of memory where her perfections alone remained, and where, as in their love, she outshone even Leonard. Her dying had made an enormous difference to their lives, for not only had it irrevocably broken the family circle, but it had undermined and then shifted all their religious beliefs, which up to that time had been unquestioned and substantial.

"My wife was a very devout woman before Dolly died," Mr. Webster told Mrs. Shardiloe. "Well, we were both good church people, but with her it was more intense, if you know what I mean." Mrs. Shardiloe had a vivid glimpse of Mrs. Webster in her church-going splendor, and nodded gravely.

"But now," he went on, "she feels—and I must say I agree with her—that what the Church teaches is only half the truth. If there is a just God, why should He have cut off a child like Dolly, young and beautiful and good, and left the earth cumbered with worthless and wicked characters?"

Mrs. Shardiloe was somewhat at a loss, but had sufficient presence of mind to reply, "Why, indeed?" and to look sympathetic and sorrowful.

"We have put these questions to ourselves," said Mr. Webster, "in a perfectly reverent spirit, and at last, in His good time, God has given us the answer." He glanced at her with sudden suspicion, as if



to be sure that she was still attending. Meeting her fine eyes, dilated with solemn inquiry, he continued.

"The conventional idea of Heaven," he said, clearing his throat, "gives us a very inadequate picture of the next world. That, of course, is only natural. We have only just arrived at that moment in evolution when we can begin to bear true knowledge. That knowledge is coming through to us now—oh, very gradually, I know: it requires a world of patience—and it is the purest souls who have passed over who are able to bring it to us."

Mrs. Shardiloe's gaze flickered in dismay to the other side of the room, where Leonard and Lily were sitting together on the sofa and Mrs. Webster was talking inquisitively to Emma. Were they never going in to supper? The strain of polite attention was making her uneasy. This flicker, however, was so brief and well controlled that it passed unnoticed. Nothing but the muscles of her eyes had moved, and Mr. Webster warmed gratefully to his subject.

"We have been holding a weekly home circle now for two years," he was saying, "under the guidance of a really remarkable man, whom you will meet this evening. I shall be very anxious to hear what impression he makes on you. He is a very powerful medium, though quite untaught. He discovered his powers by accident."

"A medium?" said Mrs. Shardiloe, coming suddenly to life, and realizing with surprise that he had all along been talking about something quite interesting, like fortunetelling; "do you mean to say that you have séances—table-turning, and rappings, and things like that?"

"Séances, yes," said Mr. Webster, a little reprovingly, "but we are rather beyond the elementary phenomena you mention. This Mr. Dawes is a very serious man, Mrs. Shardiloe, a man with wonderful gifts. His psychic powers have developed steadily during the past two years, and naturally, as conditions improve, we have developed with him. Of late Dolly has been coming through more and more clearly. When I think of the many disappointments we had in the beginning, how patient we had to be, how we almost despaired. . . ." He cast up his eyes as though words failed him in describing the eventual rewards of that devotional patience.

"But this is wonderful!" said Mrs. Shardiloe, becoming her animated self at last and laying a hand on his arm. "I have always been so interested in these things, though of course only from hearsay. One of my greatest friends, Nellie Fairey—Leonard knows her—has

been passionately fond of the occult for years, and we often talk about it. And another thing," she went on, leaning confidently forward so that their knees almost touched, "my younger girl, Emma, is definitely psychic. Oh, not a doubt of it, Mr. Webster! The things I could tell you! Believe me, ever since she was a child . . ."

The parlormaid chose this moment to announce Mr. Dawes, for whom they had been waiting, and Mrs. Shardiloe had to break off what she had been saying, though with the pleasant feeling, which Mr. Webster shared, that they would resume confidences as soon as there was intimate opportunity. Mr. Dawes was introduced without loss of time, and they went in to supper.

Emma was put to sit opposite the stranger, and almost the first thing she noticed about him was that he looked at her far more often than he did at Lily, a thing in itself remarkable. This led her to observe him more closely than she otherwise would have done, for he was not young, nor did he possess any obvious attraction to arouse her interest. He was a neat, dark man of perhaps forty, with glossy hair and mustache so symmetrically arranged that they might almost have been a waxwork's. There was a waxy perfection about his skin, too, which was hardly credible; in spite of the tapered vigor of his mustache it was difficult to believe that the rest of his face ever needed shaving. He was neat everywhere, and his clothes were unobtrusively good. His collar looked as though it had just come out of its box, his dark tie was threaded through a gold ring. His hands were well kept and his shoes, as Emma had noticed when he first appeared, were beautifully polished. There was an air of distinct but funereal dandyism about him, as though he had dressed to the top of his form in rather sad circumstances. He sat very still at the table, not crumbling his bread like Mr. Webster or turning eagerly as he talked like Mrs. Shardiloe or Leonard; his food disappeared without one seeing precisely how he did it, and he only slightly inclined his head in conversation. A stiff, self-contained man, Emma thought, and not very interesting; and then felt dissatisfied with this summing up, since it failed to take into account his remarkable eyes. His eyes were blue, and very steady; curiously disconcerting. Whenever she stole a look at him, no matter how carefully she took her gaze impartially round the table, she encountered them, and it was impossible to put a name to their expression. He would be listening apparently to Mrs. Shardiloe, his head slightly bent, and she would judge it safe to look;

but no sooner had she raised her eyes than she would meet his, instantly; and because his gaze was both penetrating and ambiguous a startled confusion would make her turn away.

"Who is he?" she whispered to Leonard when the conversation had grown sufficiently loud for her to risk the question. Leonard answered cautiously, not looking at Dawes.

"He's in the firm," he said, and seemed unwilling to say more.

From his manner Emma received the impression that he did not like Dawes, and in the same moment remembered where she had seen him before. Of course: that was it. He had looked round the door one day when she had been sitting in the office at the back of the shop, talking to Leonard; and had as abruptly disappeared, without a word.

"Don't you like him?" she whispered presently, having caught Dawes's eye once again, surprising her curiosity.

"Oh—yes," said Leonard; reluctantly, she thought; and added, as though fairness compelled him to do so, "he's a remarkable man."

Emma became aware, through the carrying quality of Mrs. Shar-diloe's whisper, that she was being talked about. Her mother was proudly telling Mr. Dawes what a queer girl she was, relating those old mysteries of her childhood. "Now he will look at me again," she thought, pleased to attribute his interest to her own importance. He did not look up, however, but kept his eyes steadily on the tablecloth while he listened. After a time she began to stare at him boldly, a little piqued, determined to catch his eye. Had what her mother told him increased his curiosity, or made him lose it? "Look at me," she commanded silently, reverting unconsciously to the forgotten magic of childhood, "look at me, look at me." But Mr. Dawes did not look her way until they rose from the table, when, momentarily off her guard as she pushed back her chair, she encountered, with a shock as perceptible as though an electric current had passed through her, the full blaze of his glance.

Passing into the drawing room with the others he was suddenly at her shoulder, and she was dismayed to find herself trembling. It was as though in the proximity of this man she had drawn unawares to the brink of some terrifying discovery. Terrifying, but necessary; something she had all along been waiting for, and was now trembling in her eagerness to know.

She was so powerfully aware of him that silence became painful. She must break the spell with some ordinary remark, force herself

to speak. She turned her head conversationally to him as they went into the room.

"This is a very happy occasion," she said, feeling that some light reference to Lily's engagement would be conventional, and safe. But Mr. Dawes for some reason mistook her meaning, and turned to her quickly with a look of pleasure and recognition that was almost startling.

"I am glad you realize it," he said in a quiet voice. "You have great perception."

The others crowded past them in the doorway, and he did not speak to her again.

Emma did not see Mr. Dawes for some time after this, but she seized the first opportunity of questioning Leonard.

"Why," he said, politely attentive, though his eyes followed Lily, who was busy arranging roses in a glass bowl, "he's a queer sort of chap. You must have seen him in the shop, surely? He's been with the firm for years, started as a shopwalker, but now he's a sort of manager, and takes most of the work off Father's hands." It was understood that Mr. Webster was an ailing man.

"Why aren't you the manager?" said Lily, who had pricked her finger slightly and was frowning over it. Leonard looked uncomfortable.

"Well," he said, "you need an older man, I suppose. He's had a lot of experience. And Father thinks the world of him. He's a medium, too, you know. He's always at the house."

Emma guessed that Leonard was jealous of Mr. Dawes, but lacked courage to say so.

"Besides," he went on, justifying himself, "I'm going to be a partner. It's not bad to be a partner at twenty-four."

"Is Mr. Dawes a partner?" said Lily quickly.

"I believe he is," said Leonard, crossing his legs and looking at the ceiling.

"But don't you *know*?" cried Lily irritably, pausing with a rose in her hand and raising her eyebrows.

"Yes, of course I know, dear. I said so, didn't I? Why are you so interested?"

"I'm not," said Lily; "it's Emma who's after him, not me. I think

he's horrible. Why should your father make him a partner before you?"

"Why not?" said Emma, "if he's been in the firm a long time. Why get so excited?"

"It's you that's excited," said Lily nastily. "Tell her if her precious Mr. Dawes is married, Leonard; that's what she wants to know."

Emma opened her mouth, but said nothing. It surprised her to realize that this had never once crossed her mind. But of course he couldn't be married. It would be ludicrous.

"He's a widower, I think," said Leonard. "Anyhow, he lives alone. He has lodgings in Dulwich. Anything else I can tell you?"

"Yes," said Emma. "Tell us about his being a medium. What is a séance like? Do you go to them?"

"Well, there," said Leonard, "I must admit he's very remarkable. I don't always sit with them, but I have, quite a lot. It means a great deal to my parents, you know, being in touch with Dolly."

"But surely," said Lily, putting finishing touches to her bowl of roses and stepping back to admire the effect, "sure you aren't taken in by that sort of thing, too, are you? I thought you had more sense."

Leonard blushed, and glanced uncomfortably at Emma.

"I'd rather not discuss it," he said, attempting dignity. Lily threw down her scissors with a clatter.

"Well!" she said, "if you can't discuss a simple thing like that with me, it's a pity. I'm sure I don't wish to force you into talking to me if you'd rather not. I'm always willing to listen to another person's opinions, I hope, even if they *are* stupid. But you'd rather not. Very well. I'll leave you two in peace, so that you *can* discuss it." She swept up the litter of stems from the table and marched to the door.

"But, dear—" said Leonard, turning unhappily in his chair, "I didn't mean . . ."

"Oh, let her go," said Emma quietly, when the door had banged, "she's only working up a temper." She slid off her chair on to the hearthrug and sat looking up at him, hugging her knees.

"You mustn't mind *her*," she said in her softest voice; "besides, you'd better get used to it."

Leonard smiled ruefully, his mind still on Lily, but eager for any comfort that Emma could give.

"I sometimes don't know what I've said to offend her," he complained; "sometimes you'd think she wasn't fond of me at all."

Emma said nothing, but looked up at him with amused affection, her lips parted.

"I seem to annoy her so often," said Leonard, inviting reassurance.

"Oh, you don't really. It's only because she's so sure of you. She's always like that. If she thought there was a chance of losing you she'd be as sweet as honey."

Leonard's glance flickered over her and then away again.

"But that's not a very kind attitude," he said; "it's not what one expects."

"No; but it's what one gets, in this case. Well, just you try, and see if I'm not right. She thinks she's got you tight, like a little dog on a string." Leonard smiled at this, but without much amusement.

"Yes, but it's very difficult to know how to take it. I can't go about pretending that I don't care for her. It's not in my nature. Besides, supposing she believed it? It'd be worse than ever."

"Oh, nonsense. You don't have to pretend anything of the sort. But if I were you I should let her see that she's not the only person in the world. You always behave as though you couldn't hear or see anybody else."

"Do I?" said Leonard, distressed. "How very rude of me."

"No, you're not rude," said Emma, smiling, "you're just foolish. You've only got to let it sink in that you *do* notice other people. Just occasionally."

"But I do. In the ordinary way, of course. But in *that* way there isn't anybody else, and she knows it."

"Isn't there?" said Emma, raising her eyebrows as Lily had done, though more invitingly; "isn't there really? When all else fails, you know, there's always me."

Leonard looked at her and laughed, and then looked at her again, more seriously, afraid that he had hurt her.

"You're very sweet," he said. "I'm very fond of you, Emma."

"Are you?"

"Of course I am. You'll be making a young man miserable yourself one of these days. *I* could fall in love with you, I could really, if it weren't for Lily."

Emma smiled at him, rocking herself lightly, her fingers laced round her knees. Seen from above, smiling up under her dark lashes, she looked quite attractive.

"I wish you would. It would do you so much good. Me too," she

added, with an air of touching candor. The atmosphere changed delicately to one of intimacy. There was a titillating suggestion that they were conspiring together, and for a moment Leonard was at a loss for something to say. The cue was for flattery, and he was not unwilling.

"You're awfully different, for sisters," he said at last. "You're so much . . . I don't know . . . softer."

"Am I? Perhaps that's because I've never had as much as Lily. She's always been so pretty. Everyone admires her."

"But you're pretty too, in your own way. You show each other off, you know, you being so dark. One doesn't notice it so much at first, perhaps, but it grows on one. And your voice. Hasn't anyone ever told you about that? You know, 'an excellent thing in woman?'"

Emma blushed with pleasure and laughed, showing her fine teeth.

"Do go on," she said. "Food for the starving. This is lovely."

The door opened abruptly, and they both started. It was Lily, enormously cool and self-possessed, a rose newly pinned in her belt, her face expressionless.

"We're having tea," she said, in a crisp, clear tone. "If you've *quite* finished, both of you, perhaps you'll join us?"

After that Leonard and Emma behaved as though they shared a mildly guilty secret. They tacitly avoided one another, but when their eyes met it was deliberately, and when Lily laughed at Leonard or snubbed him he made a cool parade of unconcern, knowing that in this he was aided and abetted by her sister. So much in love as he was, nothing that Lily said or did could have diminished her ascendancy, but he had found an ally whose secret support gave him a false feeling of security, making it almost possible to resist her. Lily behaved so capriciously, Emma had said, because she was sure of him. Very well, then: he would venture to teach her a lesson. If she laughed at him he would laugh too, and be unaffected; if she withdrew into one of those cold, disapproving silences, all exquisite indifference and raised eyebrows, from which she loved to be coaxed by long and humble questioning, he would take no notice; he would find refuge in the warm approval of Mrs. Shardiloe and Emma. All the same, he suffered from a faint sense of guilt, and when he was alone with Lily, walking home along the dusty summer pavements, he would become humble again, longing by fatal confession to secure her favor; and if she were in a high-handed mood would fall into his old error of begging

to know in what way he had offended. In such moments he thought of Emma almost with distaste, as the person who had wantonly tempted him to disloyalty; but if Lily chose, for policies of her own, to dismiss him coolly, he would curse himself for not following Emma's advice, and would think of her jolly friendliness a little wistfully.

As for Emma, she was delighted with this half-intimacy so skillfully established, and built on it hopes and suppositions which Leonard did nothing to justify. "I could get him away from her if I chose," she thought, and supported the illusion with such an ant-hill accumulation of tiny evidence that it hardened into certainty, filling her with pleasure. In the days before Lily's engagement, though she had known his preference, something of this thought must always have hovered on the edge of her mind, vague but comforting. Now the dream had advanced again, had been guiltily recognized, and stealthily accepted. Now after the first shock of recognition, in which she saw her own motives clearly and looked hastily away, the feeling of guilt had left her. This intoxicating delusion could be hugged as truth, and she was able to smile indulgently at Lily, obsessed and made daily more fretful by bridal preparations.

This phantom of power made her extremely happy, and she hardly bothered to remember Mr. Dawes. When she thought of him at all it was with impatient regret, as of something that had been full of mysterious promise, but for which there was now no room in her campaigning mind. Some day, perhaps, if things were different, she would follow her curiosity, would discover to what strange intimacy, potent yet repelling, he had seemed to invite her: but not now. Now she saw, clearly as her own image in a mirror, the triumphant step which would check the long, the lifelong struggle between herself and Lily.

She watched Leonard secretly, and at every opportunity; studied his face, his voice, his hands; memorized the turn of his head, watched for the singular sweetness of his lifted lip, endearingly apparent when he smiled. Reckless of emotion in herself, since it was not for her own heart but Leonard's that she lay in wait, she spread out her gentleness like a garment beside Lily's acerbity, silently setting out comparisons before him, subtly suggesting that in spite of all the choice was still to make.

Lily was too much absorbed in her own affairs to notice these maneuvers. If she had done so she would have thought them funny, though good enough for a quarrel. As it was, with the wedding only



two months off and all too little money to spare for bridal finery, her head was so full of materials, measurements, trimmings, blouses, corsets, tailors' and dressmakers' fittings and the stupendous home production of nightgowns and petticoats, that she was aware of nothing. Except when she dressed with irritable care to receive Leonard's visits or go to the Websters', she spent most of her time in an old kimono in the back sitting room, now given up to the making of her trousseau and heaped with paper patterns and materials, in the midst of which Aunt Nellie rocked at her treadle Singer like a china mandarin. The amount of work undertaken was prodigious, and Lily's temper suffered. She did not know when to stop, and would go on fitting herself in front of the long mirror, struggling with pins and adjustments long after she was exhausted, until, for want of a more substantial target, she would vent exasperation and fatigue in an outburst against Miss Fairey, whose nerves were frayed almost as thin as her own. Tears, reproaches, door-bangings and hysterical despair were a not uncommon end to these dressmaking evenings, followed by swollen eyes and headaches in the morning.

So precariously was she poised these days on the sharp edge of control that Mrs. Shardiloe began to wish heartily that the wedding was over. "She's unbearable," she complained to Emma, into whose company she was much thrown by this feverish and inflammable activity; "even Leonard can't get a civil word out of her nowadays."

"He doesn't know what he's letting himself in for," said Emma.

"Well, if he doesn't, after the performance we've had these last few weeks, he's a fool, that's all," said her mother. "I'm fed up with it."

The climax came one evening when Leonard was taking Lily to the theater. She had sat closely all day at her sewing, refusing to rest, grudging even the time that had to be spared for meals. Making a fetish of her trousseau, she had reached the point where she could no longer look forward to the wedding with anything but frenzy: only a few weeks now remained, and she was already exhausted. She had undertaken too much, her mother told her, and Mr. Shardiloe had become so exasperated by the constant atmosphere of tears and strain that he had offered to pay for a daily sewing woman who would relieve the pressure: but Lily had worked herself up to a pitch of martyred obstinacy, and would be helped by no one. She rose at

six in the morning to fuss over her sewing, keeping at it all day until eyes burned and shoulders ached; rushing out of the house from time to time for dressmakers' fittings and anxious visits to the new house which Leonard was trying to furnish, and on every detail of which she insisted on being consulted, though she was unwilling to spare the time to do more than hinder. Leonard came every day, his pockets full of plans and upholstery samples and rough drawings of furniture which she was too busy to examine in the shop; his patience, and the short shrift he received from Lily made Mrs. Shardiloe sorry for him. "She'll be all right when it's over," she consoled him; "she's worn out, that's all"; and when he had gone would scold Lily angrily in private. Occasionally, alarmed by her own ill moods and the effect they might be having on him, Lily would be suddenly tender and repentant, sitting with her head on his shoulder and her hand clasped in his, murmuring promises and endearments; but no sooner was he reassured and out of the way than she would return once more to the attack with maniacal energy, exacerbating the nerves of the rest of the family.

On this particular evening Leonard had insisted on diversion, and had bought dress-circle seats for *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He would call for her at six, allowing plenty of time for the journey to the Strand and a quiet dinner. At half-past five, however, Lily was still undressed, savagely wrestling with a half-made blouse in which the sleeves had mysteriously got reversed, the gathered shoulders at the front and the tight wrists pointing backwards.

"Leave it to *me* dear," begged Miss Fairey, "I'll have it right by the time you come home, and you *must* dress." But Lily, with lips compressed and eyebrows dangerously raised, continued to snatch at the threads with shaking fingers. At last, seeing that she had only ten minutes left, she ran upstairs in a panic to try and accomplish what in normal circumstances took her a full hour, and her taut nerves seized their opportunity. Her hair would not "go," a stocking split across the instep as she dragged it on, and the chain of her bracelet caught in the fastening of her dress, making a fatal tear. When Emma went upstairs to tell her that Leonard had come she found the door locked, and knew from the muffled sounds within that Lily was sobbing on her pillow.

"She says she won't go," said Emma, returning to the drawing room

with an innocent and helpless air; "you'd better go and see if you can do anything with her, Mother."

But Lily, thoroughly hysterical by this time, was not to be coaxed, and Mrs. Shardiloe came downstairs again, rosy with annoyance.

"It's no good, Leonard," she said apologetically. "I don't know what's come over her lately. One can't go near her."

"Shall I go up?" said Leonard, anxious to prove his authority but at the same time considerably frightened by his suggestion.

"For goodness' sake no," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "She'll bite your head off. I should leave her alone if I were you."

Emma, dark and still on the other side of the table, watched him closely.

"Well, but," said Leonard, crestfallen, "it's rather a shame, you know. Front-row seats, and I'd got a table at Romano's."

"Well, I'd go with you myself if I thought you wanted an old woman," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "Why don't you take Emma?"

"Oh, Mother, of course not," said Emma quickly, but she gave Leonard an ardent glance, which he received gratefully.

"Of course," he said, a little flatly, "if you'd care to, Emma. That would be delightful."

"Let me run up just once more," said Emma eagerly, "and ask Lily. She may have changed her mind."

She flew upstairs to her own room and put on her hat joyfully. Gloves, a handkerchief, her handbag were quickly assembled, and she came downstairs slowly, pausing as she passed to glance in the landing mirror. She had already dressed carefully in Leonard's honor, and was looking her best.

They drove away from the door at the moment when Lily, pierced with alarm at what she might have done, was hastily bathing her eyes with a cold sponge, rehearsing apology.

The evening was one of deep enchantment for Emma. A theater was a treat of extreme rarity, for on the infrequent occasions when the Shardiloes visited one it was almost sure to be a music hall, chosen on account of some artiste whom Mrs. Shardiloe had known in the past, and whose falling-off she could discuss contentedly. This theater, though, crusted with gilt and plush and the dust of ancient honor, was rich in the strong essences of drama which Emma craved, and in her absorption in the revenges of Monte Cristo she almost forgot to

be aware of the young man beside her. In the melodrama of his escape from prison, when the curtains rose on a mysterious night seascape, the unreal moonlight glimmering on real water, she pressed her shoulder against Leonard's and held her breath. She did not stir again until the convict, splashing darkly with audible strokes through the shallow water, clambered on the property rock and extended his dripping arms to heaven, with heroic recklessness of voice and gesture crying: "The world is mine!" Then she relaxed, letting go her breath in a sigh of pure release, turning to meet Leonard's eyes when the lights went up with such a shining look of happiness that she might have been echoing the triumphant cry of the fugitive.

When they returned the house was dark, but they had enjoyed themselves so much that they were reluctant to part, and Emma begged him to come in, if only for a minute.

"Mother always leaves a tray of biscuits and a hot drink," she said; "she'll be disappointed if you don't have something. Besides," she added, seeing him hesitate, "she's certain to be waiting up for us. She always does." This was not true, for Mrs. Shardiloe, though she loved sitting up late, got bored if she did it alone, and usually went to bed with a pot of tea and a book, to be wakeful in comfort. The supposition that she would still be there, however, was sufficient excuse, and Leonard cheerfully accepted it.

The house was quiet, as they had both expected, but a glimmer of gas was burning in the dining room, and a plate of biscuits and two cups were set out on the table with a jug of luke-warm cocoa under a knitted cosy. They drank this standing up, clasping their fingers round the cups and smiling at each other.

"Well," said Emma at length, "I don't know how to thank you for this lovely evening. I don't think I've ever enjoyed myself so much. In fact, I know I haven't."

"It was kind of you to come with me," said Leonard. "It was sweet."

"No, it wasn't. I was dying to go. I get so little fun, I'm thankful for Lily's crumbs. I'm not even sorry to think how much she's missed."

Leonard frowned.

"She didn't miss anything. She wouldn't have enjoyed it. Something would have happened to spoil it, bound to. She's like that."

He put down his cup and smiled at her, comically rueful. "Tell me why Lily isn't more like you?"

"You mean, why am I not more like Lily?"

"No, not that at all. You're just as lovely, Emma, really. Lovelier . . ."

They stood poised hesitantly for a moment, smilingly conscious of what was going to happen. Then they were in one another's arms, murmuring and confused at first, then very still. The clock ticked busily on the mantelpiece.

Lily opened the door so silently that for fully half a minute neither was aware of her. At last Leonard, moved by some obscure suspicion that all was not well, opened his eyes, and saw her standing icy still in the doorway, observing them with the frigid distaste with which she might have watched the coupling of animals. He broke away slowly: Emma was drugged and heavy in his arms. Hazily, as though waking from sleep, she blinked at her sister.

"I've no wish to disturb you," said Lily, each word falling separately in the stillness like a fragment of glass, "but it's past midnight, and I came down to turn out the light."

"Lily," said Leonard, steadying himself against the table as Emma sprang away, "I . . ." He swallowed, forcing his mazed expression into one of ludicrous concern. "I . . . hope you're feeling better?"

Emma snatched up her hat and gloves and pushed violently past her sister. She ran up the stairs, lurching against the banisters, her mouth open as though she were going to cry, not knowing how she felt or where she was going.

Lily and Leonard were married the following week, by special license and with only two witnesses, leaving the trousseau in billows of confusion in the back room, Lily's sacrifice to recognized emergency; and in due course Emma received a number of picture post-cards from Penzance, where they had gone for their honeymoon.

# Chapter V

(1899-1900)

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THE HOUSE ON BRIXTON HILL SETTLED DOWN INTO A lethargy of quiet, emptier than in all the years that Emma remembered. With Lily gone, and the last echoes of her wedding died away, it seemed to have reached a period in its history, to have given up the pretense of youthful interests and to have sunk gently into suburban middle age, a brooding and muffled house. Its hangings and ornaments, once so rich and just to her younger eyes, now had the shabby pathos of things discarded. Soot lay on Lily's window sill, the dining room was stale with the breath of cruets: she roamed the house with wondering distaste.

Outside it was equally cheerless: the garden lay arid and neglected, black earth and gravel and sooty laurel bushes, too sour and barren for her halfhearted attempts at gardening, swallowing her packets of seeds without response. Electric trams now sighed to a standstill outside the gate, starting again with a rising groan on the long gradient, alien and ugly after the little rumbling horse trams of her childhood. The trams were the last thing she heard at night and the first sound on waking, and she learned to expect the coming of their skimming whine, to know at what point they would blunder over an inequality in the track, spitting irritable sparks. Their mourning voices became bound up in her imagination with the house itself, as much a part of it as the bell in the stone passage, or the acrid smells haunting the back stairs. She would have been glad now of Bessie's company, of her warm homeliness which had been so unfailing in comfort; but Bessie was gone long ago, married to that Thomas Appleyard whose name had once stirred her spirit to poetic motions, and the kitchen was the frowsty lair of her transient successors.

No one but Emma saw any change in the house, and what she saw was no more than a reflection of her own dissatisfied spirit. Hers was now the only youth that it harbored, and she fretted against its

resigned and settled air, a living growth in an arrangement of fossils. Mrs. Shardiloe's only complaint was that money was scarce; the surgical appliances business was going downhill, and its gradual decay encroached on her personal habits, enforcing a parsimony which was against her nature and deteriorating the shoddy succession of servants. She was slipping more perceptibly into middle age, caring a little less for her appearance, dozing in her chair after meals as Grandma had done, finding it more trouble than it was worth to entertain her friends. Mr. Morton came from time to time and Miss Fairey as often as before, making herself useful; but their presence was taken for granted and required no effort.

The pattern of life went on as usual, comfortable and dull, much quieter for Lily's absence. Mrs. Shardiloe relaxed. Emma would, she supposed, soon follow Lily's example, and in the meantime it was pleasant to let day succeed day in effortless progression, chewing the soporific cud of trivial affairs. Her chief interest was now in Lily's household, and once a week she went, sometimes alone, sometimes with her husband or Emma, to spend the evening in the neat new villa in Herne Hill, returning refreshed by Lily's servant problems. Emma found these visits exciting at first, an escape into new company and a glimpse of what she hoped one day to enjoy; but after a year she found them merely depressing; Leonard was too obviously gone beyond recall, absorbed in himself and Lily and the coming baby, and their friends were a monotonous circle of married couples.

Where, Emma wondered, did one find a husband? Like most girls of her class she was expected to marry, but to manage it herself; young men must come if one were only desirable; true love would emerge in time from chance encounters. But where? thought Emma, pausing in her dusting of the dead drawing room and brooding long and resentfully in the window. They did not ring the bell and inquire if there were a marriageable daughter. They did not follow one in the street, as Lily pretended; or if they did, they were grotesque, monsters of middle age and sinister effrontery, making one quicken one's pace, not daring to look round.

She read accounts of engagements and marriages in the newspapers with puzzled envy. How facile it was in that superior world! At the right moment—oh, long before they were as old as she—girls were presented to the Queen, and from that moment no effort was spared for the consummation. They were displayed at dances, young men

were invited and coaxed for this very purpose, and mothers, she had heard, campaigned quite frankly together for suitable marriages. How excellent, how sensible! What a practical method of defeating intolerable odds! Mrs. Shardiloe seemed to think that she had done her duty if she told Emma's fortune occasionally, promising a dark lover or a fair one according to the cards, a letter, a ring, an unexpected meeting. But in time even this homely pastime became painful to Emma through her inability to confirm these rosy prophecies.

"Can't you place him, dear? Brown hair and blue eyes, and the seven of hearts right in his lap?"

"No, Mother, I don't think I can at the moment."

"Well, you will, I dare say. It's quite plain. And here you are being offered a ring, and going into a big building . . ."

It was humiliating to go on admitting that one could place none of them, none of these kings and knaves who appeared in the cards, surrounded by symbols of love, bearing rings and gifts. Eventually even Mrs. Shardiloe gave it up, and accounted for them with a prosaic resourcefulness which was worse than anything.

"Look, here's a fair man coming to the house. That'll be Uncle Fred, I expect, or Mr. Morton. And here you are, receiving some jewelry by post. Would that be your watch, I wonder, coming back from repair?"

Emma's interest in fortunetelling dwindled.

The autumn, however, brought unexpected excitements. Trouble was working like yeast through the news from South Africa, and the stirrings and bubblings of grievance had grown loud enough to be heard even by the Shardiloes, who normally took no interest in political affairs. Tom Shardiloe let his kipper grow cold while he read aloud passages from the *Daily Mail* about Kruger and Uitlanders; he had been once in Johannesburg years ago with a touring company, and was inclined to take the Boers' side in the quarrel. "Why can't the Government mind their own business?" he asked his wife. "If there's a war, it'll be simply to get the Dutchman's potato patch, nothing else. I never saw any of these outlander grievances when I was in South Africa."

"Yes, but that was a long time ago, dear. Things change. I dare say the Government has very good reasons that we know nothing about."

"That I'll never believe. If they've got such wonderful reasons,

why don't they give them? No, no, they're just out to do each other down, like all the rest of us. I know South Africa and I know the Dutchman. I know about those gold and diamond mines, too, and I draw my own conclusions."

Emma made a polite murmur of interest, but her thoughts wandered. What was going on in South Africa could not possibly concern her, but what was happening in Brixton that afternoon was of the first importance. She had persuaded old Mrs. Webster to invite her to a séance, and her mind was speculatively examining her memory of Dawes.

It was nearly a year and a half since she had seen him, and her memory of the odd little man, though still disturbing, had been overlaid by boredom and discontent. She had not, until very recently, thought of him as a means of escape from the dead end in which she found herself, since the only escape that she had so far envisaged was marriage. Now, however, when hope had found nothing to feed on, and she had even come to believe that she would never marry, she had turned almost with a sense of relief in other directions. Starved of interest, she had nibbled halfheartedly at several things. Should she earn her own living? Aunt Nellie had suggested the millinery business and had offered to teach her, but the prospect of workroom life was far from inviting, and it was impossible, she knew, to work up a connection at home. If she had had even Lily's talents she might have turned to the theater, but on that score she had no illusions. She was equipped for nothing.

Suddenly, and, as it seemed, irrelevantly, her searching mind had stumbled on the memory of Dawes. She passed over it; then, with a slight feeling of shock, turned back, wondering why he had seemed to offer a solution. He had spoken to her only once, more than a year ago, and had appeared to attach a mysterious importance to their meeting. Did he believe, unlikely thought, that she was a person worth knowing? Had it occurred to him that her "powers" were worth attention? But, of course, if he were a real medium he must have seen through her at once. Then why that disturbing glance, that deliberate suggestion of significance in the encounter? She examined her memory minutely, with new intentness, and the more she remembered the clearer grew the conviction that she must see Dawes again. Here was a puzzle that she had left too long unsolved, and it presented itself

with quite inexplicable urgency. She would go and have tea with Mrs. Webster and find out more about him.

On the evening on which Kruger's ultimatum to the Government was due to expire Mr. Dawes walked out of the staff entrance of J. Webster and Sons, glanced sharply to right and left along the front of the shop, shuttered by canvas blinds, on the stroke of six, and crossed the road diagonally to the tram stop. He stood at the corner buttoning his leather gloves, gazing across at the shop with an air of abstraction. The blind in the lace and trimmings window, he noticed, had come down crookedly, leaving a triangular gap at the bottom, and the big metal letters carrying the name of the firm across the bricks of the second story wanted cleaning. He noticed these things with only one part of his attention, for he was absorbed in his own thoughts; nevertheless, and without interrupting his private musing, he made a mental note and filed it in an appropriate pigeonhole at the back of his mind. Like a well-kept desk Mr. Dawes's mind was full of partitions and drawers where matters were tidily sorted and tucked away and kept in their proper order until they were needed. It was his secret pride that his brain worked independently of his memory, by which he meant that while the chief of his attention was occupied elsewhere, the observing and docketing process went on automatically.

The tram came sighing and skimming along the road, and Mr. Dawes stepped authoritatively off the curb, raising a gloved hand. He waited until it had quite stopped, not dodging about or hurrying to meet it as most people did, and advanced deliberately to the step. Having chosen his place, as far as possible from the other passengers, he extracted twopence from his leather purse and sat with the coins held firmly between finger and thumb, waiting for the conductor. The tram started with a jerk, briefly swaying and restoring the two rows of passengers, and Mr. Dawes withdrew into his calculations.

It was worrying about this South African business, which pointed inevitably to war. Doubtless, if it came to it, it would be a short one, a sharp expedition which would settle the matter for good and all and teach the Boers a lesson; but all the same it was disturbing, putting ideas into people's heads which were better out of them, interrupting the even progression of life as he had arranged it. It would not, he supposed, make much difference to business (here he made a mental note about South African wool and its relation to drapers' flannels),

but he had not at all liked the excitement which old Webster had betrayed over the morning's news. He was accustomed to controlling the things in which his employer was interested, and an affair of such national importance was clearly beyond him. That being so, and the fact faced, how could he turn it to his own advantage? Mr. Dawes believed that setbacks should always, wherever possible, be turned into advances, since even the most discouraging situation contained a hidden profit. This was not always easy to uncover; but if one concentrated, if one looked at the position from every angle and kept it before one's mind waking and sleeping, the weak point, the inevitable loophole, eventually appeared. In this case, he was beginning to think, the loophole was Leonard.

"If we're going to teach these Boers a lesson," Mr. Webster had said, "my boy will want to go. There'll be no holding him." Dawes himself thought this reaction unlikely. Leonard was too happily circumstanced, too smugly absorbed in his home and his pretty wife to want to exchange them for the chance of death in South Africa. On the other hand, the boy was conventional and easily impressed: whatever was expected of him he did: and Dawes knew enough of the effects of opinion and sentiment to guess that if the popular temper (as seemed probable) acclaimed the war, it would not be long before Leonard had kicked himself into a uniform and on to a troopship. He would probably even be convinced that he wanted to go. He was a malleable lad.

The conductor was working his way along the tram and Dawes held out his twopence without looking at him. There was a ping from the metal punch and he received his ticket, glanced briefly at its number (numbers were important) and resumed his blank stare through the opposite window.

The question was, how would he, Walter Dawes, be affected? In one of two ways, surely: either young Webster, becoming a family hero, would be rewarded out of all proportion to his deserts by being left the business entire—a possibility which Dawes had worked for years to defeat: or else (and this was the pleasanter prospect and therefore less likely) he would never come back at all, in which case it would be child's play to consolidate his own present position. He had spent half his life, he reflected, in the service of the firm; the best years of his life, the years for which a man might fairly expect reward. Was it likely that he would want to see Websters' handed

over to a boy, to submit to the control of a young fathead who could mismanage it as he fancied? Mr. Dawes frowned, unaware that he was staring straight at a young woman in a velvet hat, who blushed and tossed her head. Certainly not, he said to himself, certainly not. He was in Webster's confidence. He was his right hand—no, more than that, he was the brains of the whole concern. Every detail of every department was docketed and accounted for in his mind's index. If any man had a right to the whole bag and baggage of J. Webster & Sons after the old man's death, Walter Dawes was that man.

So far, he knew, he had taken no false step. He had advanced to his present position with admirable caution, inch by inch. He was not a man to charge at his object, like a bull at a gate-post. He had been careful, hard-working, circumspect, yes, and fortunate. Those gifts which the Almighty had bestowed on him, those really remarkable gifts (here Mr. Dawes blinked, for the strain of concentrated staring had made his eyes water) had helped him all along the line. He had been able to give the Websters something that they needed, something which now, indeed, they could not do without, and it was not to be wondered at that they were grateful. It was not to be wondered at that they had placed him in a position of trust, and, since he had never failed them, since he had given them what they wanted and had done no more in his own interest than to reckon the cost, his worst enemy could not say that he had abused it.

The tram slowed down, and Mr. Dawes, abruptly adjusting his vision to the world around him, met the resentful but curious eyes of the young woman opposite and glanced indifferently away. This was where he got out. Some compartment at the back of his brain had been measuring the journey, checking the stops and recognizing the landmarks, and now signaled that it was time to leave the tram. He stepped off briskly and turned down a side road, walking delicately over a pavement spattered with leaves. It was getting dark, and the smoke of garden bonfires sharpened the air. Mr. Dawes enjoyed the gentle autumn smells, sooty mixture of twigs and burning leaves and musty sweetness of chrysanthemums behind iron railings: he sniffed approvingly. What a gift was the sense of smell, he considered, in a civilized world where there was much to refresh and little to offend it. He checked his brisk pace for a moment to admire an orderly bed of dahlias, wine-dark enormous heads supported on cane stakes crowned with reversed flower-pots. He wished that he had brought

an offering of flowers for Mrs. Webster. Though it was not, he reflected, these little attentions which got one anywhere; it was weakness to resort to them. Power was never purchased by a florist's bouquet: it was bought with its own currency.

This brought him to another worrying subject, which had lain watchfully at the back of his mind during the tram ride, awaiting attention. He could not disguise from himself the fact that his mediumship, devoted to the service of the Websters for the past three years, had come to a standstill: there was nothing further, single-handed, that he could do; yet where, for maneuvers of such extreme delicacy, could he look for a helper? (The word "confederate" peeped out of a dusty pigeonhole and was sharply dismissed. It was not often, even in private meditation, that he allowed ugly words to leap their barriers, for if a man could not even control his own thoughts, where was he? Yes, indeed, thought Mr. Dawes, severely making a mental note about self-discipline, where was he?) In the past three years the séances had given excellent results: nothing clumsy, nothing sensational, nothing to put a strain on credulity or to awaken mistrust: manifestations sufficient, in fact, to whet the appetite and confirm faith, leaving always a patient hunger for something more. Little by little, as one hoped and expected, the phenomena had grown more rewarding. Messages rapped out on tables and chairs had been succeeded by Dolly's own voice, whispering faintly in the trumpet; his own control, Dr. Kelly, had come through more and more strongly, making characteristic little jokes with the Websters, giving them news of their daughter, adopting the tone of a jolly but authoritative uncle. In recent months, too, there had been several rapports—a few fresh violets dropped in Mrs. Webster's lap during Christmas week, a small heart-shaped piece of amethyst for her husband. Also he had given a good deal of time to automatic writing, and had encouraged Mrs. Webster to do the same, with interesting results. But what they wanted now, as he very well know, was materialization.

They had set their hearts on this prize for all their patience. The image of Dolly, vouchsafed to their aching eyes in devout darkness, had become the supreme object of their desires, and, impatient with disappointment, they had lately hinted that sitters had reached this advanced level with other mediums. It was easy, of course, to point out that these mediums were professionals, prostituting their powers for the sake of a living, and therefore open to suspicion; but a defense

of this kind was dangerous, since it invited a critical approach to his own methods. Dogs did not eat dog, Mr. Dawes reasonably believed, for the simple reason that it was safer not to do so. The problem, however, remained, and to handle it well required the most exquisite judgment. He had counseled patience, held out hopes of results, doubted whether the psychic power of the circle was altogether sufficient; but one could not go on like that forever. If he were to keep his hold on the Websters, Dolly had got to materialize; the future depended on the solution of this difficulty.

He must have a helper; a woman; of necessity a young one; and here his thoughts turned, as they had done so often during the past twelve months, to the younger Miss Shardiloe. He prided himself on his power of assessing character, and from the glimpse he had had of her he judged her as excellent material. She was, her mother had said, undoubtedly psychic: she was therefore suggestible. She was also on the fringe of the family circle and above suspicion. (Mr. Dawes did not put it to himself quite like that; but the thought peeped discreetly at the back of his mind while he argued that she would be sympathetic to the Websters' vibrations, an ideal vehicle.) He had inquired about her once or twice, quite casually, of Mrs. Webster, suggesting that to gain more power it would perhaps be nice to include her in the regular circle: but Mrs. Webster seemed, with the exception of Lily, not to care for the Shardiloes, and she had never been invited. Just as well perhaps, thought Mr. Dawes, comforting himself; she might prove untrustworthy, hysterical, stupid, vain—in short, dangerous. It would be safer to solve the problem in some other way. Yet he had liked the look of her; those dark eyes, that undeniable presence, that mobile yet secret face. There was value in her somewhere.

He turned in at the Websters' gate and walked up the clipped grass verge beside the path, disliking the noisy gravel. In daylight he would have kept to the drive, treading distastefully, but in the dusk no one would observe this minor trespass, and he preferred the lawn. He avoided the oblong of light from the drawing-room window and ran up the steps.

The door opened almost as soon as he had touched the bell, for someone had apparently arrived immediately before him and the narrow hall was crowded. He caught sight of Mr. Webster near the umbrella stand, talking to a big woman in a feather boa; there was

also a younger woman, tall and slender with her back to him, and a man who was a stranger. He gave his hat and coat to the parlormaid and stood still, waiting for the hush which would fall as they became aware of his presence.

"Well, come on in," said the voice of Mrs. Webster from somewhere out of sight; "don't keep them standing, Arthur."

The group dissolved toward the drawing room, but the younger woman hesitated. She turned round slowly, for no apparent reason, and gave him a sidelong glance. With a sudden sense of what he would have described as destiny, and a complete absence of surprise, he recognized Emma.

The procedure at the Websters' séances was always the same. First there was a light supper, cold meat and salad with hard-boiled eggs, cheese for those who wanted it, stewed fruit and jelly. There was usually a little cold chicken for Mr. Dawes, and some special delicacy in the shape of a bunch of grapes or a peach, for he made a point of eating almost nothing before a sitting. He preferred, he said, to fast completely, except that an empty stomach sometimes produced discomfort, interfering with the trance condition. After supper he always withdrew for a quarter of an hour's solitude and concentration to the room at the back of the house which was known as the library. When the sitters assembled he was usually lying on the horsehair couch or sitting in his chair, a hand over his eyes. Afterwards he liked to rest in the same manner for a few minutes, in perfect quiet, before joining the family for a last reverent discussion and a cup of cocoa. He never drank anything stronger than cocoa, though the long sittings often left him exhausted. He was, as he appeared to be, a single-minded and abstemious man.

"I do hope," said Mr. Webster, performing introductions, "that you'll forgive us for bringing in two new sitters without mentioning it first. We didn't know ourselves until this morning, though I've often hoped to interest Mrs. Shardiloe and the young lady."

"If Mr. Dawes objects," said Mrs. Webster, helping him to a wing of chicken and three slices of breast, "I'm quite sure Mrs. Shardiloe will understand. It would be a pity to disturb the conditions."

"Not at all," said Dawes, bowing slightly in the direction of the newcomers. "I shall be delighted." He shot a glance of inquiry at the strange gentleman.

"Mr. Morton isn't staying," said Mrs. Webster; "he was just accompanying the ladies."

"No, indeed," said Mr. Morton, "I didn't even intend to stay to supper. Very kind of you to press me. Very kind indeed." He looked at the cold meat a little unhappily.

"Now, why not, Major?" said Mrs. Shardiloe, enjoying the sensation of Mr. Webster's admiration and attracted by the idea of opposing his wife. "I'm sure we shall all find it extremely intriguing." She turned to Mr. Webster. "Mr. Morton was so helpful to us when we were troubled with those disturbances I told you about before. I don't know what we should have done without him. Indeed I don't."

"No, really," began Mr. Morton, but he too looked at Mr. Webster, hoping to be included. There was an awkward silence.

"Well, why not?" said Mr. Webster at length, anxious to please. "I'm not sure that a little fresh blood wouldn't be an advantage. Dr. Kelly was saying only last week that the power was insufficient."

"Dr. Kelly?"

"The principal control. A great character, believe me. We might at least, I think, make the experiment." His fingers strayed up to his beard and he gave Mrs. Shardiloe a watery smile, confidential and encouraging. Mrs. Webster's corsets creaked ominously.

"It's for Mr. Dawes to say," she said. "I'm sure we should be very pleased to have Mr. Morton, but this is a very long-established circle, and one doesn't want to disturb the good conditions. Three new sitters, after all, is quite a lot."

"But my dear, Mr. Dawes was saying only the other day . . . Now Leonard comes so rarely there are only three of us, a very inadequate number. Don't you think, Dawes, that it's worth trying?"

Mr. Dawes looked briefly at the intruder, and in the same instant that Mr. Morton's professional curiosity was aroused the medium was aware of danger. He hesitated. Would it be wise, he wondered, to make a point of excluding him? It would be easy enough to let the séance be a failure, attributing the blank sitting to hostile influences. After that the Websters themselves could be trusted to exclude him.

"Oh, do let him stay," said Emma suddenly. "I should like him to."

"Certainly," said Mr. Dawes in his quiet voice. "I have no objection. It doesn't rest with me, you know: I'm only the instrument." Having dropped this hint that the spirit world might take a less favor-

able view of Mr. Morton, he looked at his watch and excused himself from the table.

"This is very kind of you," said Mr. Morton, addressing Mrs. Webster; "I've never been to a spirit séance before, though I've always hoped for the opportunity of meeting a medium."

"Mr. Dawes is a very remarkable one."

"One senses that at once." Instinctively he set about charming his audience into a trustful attitude. "Tell me, what form of control do you generally employ?"

"Control?"

"I understand that most mediums welcome something of the kind, to safeguard them from suspicion. Having their hands held, or being tied in their chair, for instance."

"Mr. Dawes," said Mrs. Webster, giving him a sharp look, "is not a professional medium, Mr. Morton. He has developed his gifts in a purely religious spirit, and suspicion would be out of place. I can quite believe that precautions are necessary with mediums who do these things for money, but Mr. Dawes is not one of these."

"Quite," said Mr. Morton, "quite."

"However," she went on, feeling her antagonism melting before the polite deference of this agreeable stranger, "Mr. Dawes has often asked, of his own accord, to be roped in his chair, especially when outsiders have been with us. Some of our best results have been obtained under these conditions. I dare say he will suggest it himself tonight."

"I dare say he will," said Mr. Morton approvingly. "I hope so. Very interesting."

In a few minutes Mrs. Webster rose and they went into the library, a small stuffy room so called because among a great deal of mahogany furniture it contained a glass-fronted bookcase. The windows were heavily curtained, and one corner of the room was concealed by black sateen curtains suspended from a rod, after the manner of a homemade wardrobe. These curtains were open: inside them, Mr. Morton saw, was a small armchair with a length of new cord neatly coiled on the seat. On the carpet beside the chair was a cone-shaped cardboard trumpet, standing mouth downwards, a tambourine, and a small dinner bell. Five chairs were arranged in a semicircle facing this corner, and behind the chairs was a round table bearing glasses and a jug of water. Mr. Dawes was lying on a sofa with his eyes closed. He got up slowly

when they came in and took his stand in front of the armchair, rubbing his hands thoughtfully together, his eyes vacant.

"Sit here, please," said Mrs. Webster at Mr. Morton's elbow, indicating the center chair of the semicircle. She motioned Emma and Mrs. Shardiloe to the two end chairs, and herself sat down between Emma and Mr. Morton. Her husband was busy at the table, putting a match to a night light under a ruby shade. When he had done this he came and sat down in the vacant chair, looking happy and solemn. Mrs. Shardiloe glanced at him mischievously, but was checked by his air of reverent expectancy.

"Our Father," said Mr. Dawes suddenly.

"Which art in Heaven," responded the Websters, "hallowed be Thy name . . ."

Mrs. Shardiloe joined in, feeling slightly foolish. Her frame of mind, she realized, was the wrong one. She adjusted herself, not without nervousness, to a more appropriate mood. She could hear Emma's voice, quick and a little breathless, tinged with awe. Mrs. Shardiloe closed her eyes.

The prayer over, Mr. Dawes sat down, holding out the length of cord to Mr. Webster.

"Perhaps," he said softly, "as we have new sitters with us tonight you'd better truss me up, just to put their minds at rest."

Mr. Webster took the cord gingerly and looked at his wife.

"Oh, I hardly think . . ." he began.

"Come, come," said Dawes, "it makes no difference to me one way or the other. It's just a little uncomfortable and rather more exhausting, that's all. I really would prefer it on this occasion."

Mrs. Webster shot Mr. Morton a triumphant glance.

"Very well," said Mr. Webster, "if you wish it." He put a couple of loops round Dawes' body and the back of the chair and began to fuss with the knots.

"Let me help you," said Mr. Morton. "Excuse me," and he took the cord politely from his host's fingers.

Dawes said nothing, but he winced when a slipknot was tightened round one of his wrists.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Morton, "but if you would sit really well back in your chair it would be much more efficacious, you know. This cord's rather stiff."

"I can feel it is," said Dawes with a grimace; "it's cutting my wrist already."

"Dear me, I'm sorry." He made a feint of easing the knot. "Is that better?"

"I think so," said Dawes. "It doesn't matter to me one way or the other, you understand, but one likes to avoid anything positively painful."

"Really, Mr. Morton," said Mrs. Webster, "I assure you that this is quite unnecessary."

"Unnecessary, perhaps," said Dawes, "but in the circumstances, I think, desirable. I asked for it myself, remember. There. I hope everyone is satisfied that I'm trussed like a Christmas turkey. I can move neither hand nor foot."

He closed his eyes and Mr. Morton returned to his seat. Mr. Webster tiptoed to the gas bracket and turned out the light. Nothing remained now but the ruby glow of the night light under its glass shade, bathing the backs of the sitters in blood-red warmth and flooding the room with shadow.

Emma clasped her hands together in her lap, surprised to find them trembling. Excitement touched her, tinged with grotesque dread: also a mounting and tremulous desire to laugh. What could possibly happen, in that stuffy and ordinary room? Not knowing what to expect, her imagination swung in a dangerous direction, and to protect herself against panic she made much of every detail that struck her as absurd. That odd little man, for instance, trussed in his chair, as he had said, like a Christmas turkey, and all of them sitting solemnly round, like a prayer meeting. What a comical way of inviting the spirit world! She had imagined something far more dramatic and mysterious, she told herself, not this stolid sitting around in a close back room. All the same, there was something in the atmosphere that was far from normal. The strong expectancy of the Websters slowly infected her.

Dawes had begun to breathe loudly; deep, regular, painful breaths. She fixed her eyes apprehensively on his face. In the semidarkness he looked drawn and old, his cheeks sucked in and his nostrils dilated by the stertorous breathing. He moved his head blindly from side to side, groaning in a voice that was scarcely louder than a whisper, consumed by some inner struggle.

"We'd better have a hymn," said Mrs. Webster unexpectedly, and immediately, producing a powerful vibrating note at the back of her

nose, sang authoritatively, like a command: "Abide with me . . . Her husband joined in, and the others, feeling that this was expected of them, followed. Between them they achieved quite a remarkable volume of sound. The room grew appreciably hotter.

Dawes by this time seemed to have reached and passed some invisible crisis. His head had fallen a little sideways, and his mouth was open. His breathing, though still audible, was quieter, like the breathing of a man in heavy though troubled sleep. Mrs. Webster nodded significantly at her husband, who obediently got up and drew the black sateen curtains, hiding the medium. He blew out the light.

"By Jove," said Mr. Morton enviously, under his breath.

"Hushed was the evening hymn," sang Mrs. Webster's majestic, front-pew voice. "The temple courts were dark . . ."

The others joined in, Mrs. Shardiloe singing "Lah-di-dah" as unobtrusively as possible, since she did not know the words.

The darkness was startlingly intense, like a black cloth dropped suddenly over the eyes. Strain how she might, Emma could find no variation in the blackness; nothing visible emerged, even as her eyes grew used to it; it was like being buried underground. For a time little points of light swam across her vision, memories of the ruby glow that Mr. Webster had extinguished, but presently these too faded, and the old terrors of childhood drew warningly near. It was darker than the old linen cupboard had ever been; and as she stared, upright and motionless on her chair, the darkness, in a way she dreadfully remembered, stirred and was alive. The noise of singing did nothing to reassure her, distracting senses which ached with the desire to be aware: under cover of those nasal voices the old menacing presences perceptibly advanced.

She made an effort to steady herself, to regain the contemptuous realism which had comforted her before the light went out. Her mother was there in the dark, she told herself, and Mr. Morton; there was nothing to be afraid of; she could even distinguish their voices. And somewhere in front of her was the grotesque figure of Dawes, his mouth open, knotted into his chair. Yes. But what else besides? She had a sudden conviction that he was no longer as she had last seen him, passive and a little absurd. The darkness had changed his image. He was full of power. His strength flowed out and enveloped her. He was suddenly close. So close, she thought, that his breath passed over her face.

She felt the chill of perspiration on her forehead, and gripped her hands. What, she asked herself shakily, did she expect to see? What were they there for? "What came ye out for to see?" said a thin voice out of her memory: Miss Bannister's voice, conducting the Scripture lesson. For a moment of respite she clung to that remembered school-room, the dusty windows, the desks, the blackboard, the smell of ink and chalk, Miss Bannister's catarrhal voice. The vision was clear in her memory and oddly comforting. But from it emerged, placid and unbidden, Dolly Webster's face.

Emma stirred, shocked to remember that it was for Dolly's sake that they were assembled. Dead Dolly, so ordinary, so dull, so little regarded, was it possible that her spirit moved upon the darkness, a figment of terror, plaintive, unapproachable? The image took possession of her, persuasive, yet somehow dreadful; her voice cried out from the past; she would not be denied. "Dolly," whispered Emma, under cover of the singing, "Dolly . . . ?"

The hymn came to an end and nothing happened. The room was full of breathing. Somebody's chair creaked, and Emma roused herself with an effort, trying to shake off the memory of Dolly, so disturbingly present, so real that she half expected to feel her hand. From the direction of Dawes came a sound between a sigh and a groan.

"There!" said Mrs. Webster in a sharp whisper. She began humming under her breath, as if in encouragement, but her voice died away as the medium began to murmur.

". . . surprised . . ." said Dawes in a strange voice. Or was it Dawes? Emma's flesh crept.

"Surprised . . ." he murmured again, ". . . painful . . ." They could hear his labored breathing.

"Good evening, Dr. Kelly," said Mrs. Webster firmly. There was no response.

Suddenly a strong and unfamiliar voice spoke in the darkness. Mrs. Shardiloe jumped.

"Trying to tell you," it said in a hearty but somewhat aggrieved tone, ". . . very difficult . . ." There was a pause. Then, almost angrily: "Can't you see the medium's in great pain?"

"You forget that we can't see, Dr. Kelly," said Mr. Webster gently; "what is the matter?"

This time the voice sounded farther away, muffled by fatigue.

"No use," it said. "Great pain . . . too difficult."

"Shall I light the lamp?" said Mr. Webster anxiously. Dr. Kelly did not reply. The medium moaned.

"I think you'd better, Arthur," said Mrs. Webster; "there's something wrong."

Her husband moved from his chair and fumbled with the matches. He struck twice, and a flame spurted brightly between his hands, throwing fantastic shadows. He lit the little red lamp and pulled back the curtains of the cabinet.

Dawes was sunk in his chair, his head fallen forward on his chest. He looked very ill. Mr. Webster went over to him and touched his wrist, timidly; then laid a hand on his forehead. Dawes gave a deep sigh and stirred in his chair. He opened his eyes.

"Wha's a matter?" he said thickly.

"Are you all right, Mr. Dawes?" said Mrs. Webster, heaving herself out of her chair and rustling toward him.

"I . . . I think so. What are you doing? Has anything happened?"

"Dr. Kelly said you were in pain. He said it was too difficult. Are you sure you're all right?"

Dawes looked at her in a dazed way, then down at his hands.

"My wrists," he said. "I think there's something wrong with them." Mrs. Webster bent over him solicitously.

"Light the gas, Arthur. I can't see anything in this light."

The gas jet wheezed and popped, and the room sprang into detail. "Why," said Mrs. Webster indignantly, "his wrists are all swollen up! Pretty near cut through, they are, with this abominable cord." She fumbled at the knots, then turned round, her face dark with anger. "Mr. Morton, since this is your doing, perhaps you'll be kind enough to come and release Mr. Dawes. I never saw such a cruel tying up in all my life! I must say, really, Mr. Morton!"

"I'm extremely sorry," said Mr. Morton, getting up with a leap. "I assure you, I didn't tie them particularly tight. The cord's very new, which makes that almost impossible. Of course, if one were to strain against it, that would naturally result . . ."

"Untie the knots, please," said Mrs. Webster sharply. "Most distressing. I wouldn't have had this happen for the world."

Mr. Morton rapidly loosed the cord and they all looked anxiously at the medium, who was ruefully rubbing his wrists.

"Please don't apologize," he said in his thin voice. "A tiresome accident, that's all. I quite appreciate your desire to take precautions. In-

deed, I welcome them." He looked round vaguely. "Unfortunately, physical pain interferes with the trance condition. I wasn't conscious of anything myself, beyond a feeling of frustration; like a heavy weight, almost. But apparently my wrists knew better. The flesh is weak, Mr. Morton."

"I can't sufficiently apologize," said Mr. Morton. "I had no intention of causing you any discomfort."

"Don't mention it," said Dawes. "We must try again, that's all." He passed his hand across his eyes and down his face, rubbing his pallid jaws. "The nuisance of it is, that it takes it out of one so, being brought out of trance suddenly like that. I suppose we didn't get anything?"

"You murmured several words," said Mr. Morton.

"I?" said the medium, "I murmured."

Mrs. Webster brushed Mr. Morton impatiently aside.

"Dr. Kelly came through," she said, "but he only spoke a few words. The conditions were obviously bad, and no wonder. I think you'd be well advised to rest for this evening, Mr. Dawes. We can sit again on Wednesday." She threw a blighting glance at Mr. Morton, who had returned meekly to his chair.

"No, no," said Dawes, "we won't throw up the sponge without making another attempt. And you must on no account blame our visitor. Like ourselves, he is a seeker after truth, even if his methods are a little . . . well, clumsy." He gave Mr. Morton one of his rare and rather charming smiles. "Come now, Mr. Morton, if you are prepared to put me to the torture again, I am quite ready."

"No, please," said Mr. Morton. "I would much prefer someone else to do it."

"As you like," said Dawes indifferently. "Mr. Webster is quite an old hand at the business."

Mr. Webster sprang forward and busied himself with the cord, passing it many times round the medium's body and the back of the chair. Dawes sat with his eyes closed and lips compressed, as if trying to recall the remains of his scattered strength. When the tying was finished and the light turned out, leaving the room bathed once more in reddish darkness, he opened his eyes suddenly.

"An idea has just occurred to me," he said hesitantly, "which might be worth trying. I don't know if it will work, but Mr. Morton was saying, I think, about the voice of the control . . . He was a little confused, wasn't he, as to whether the voice was Dr. Kelly's, or

simply mine? Well, mightn't it be worth trying, just as an experiment, if I filled my mouth with water? Then, if no voice comes through during trance, Mr. Morton will know what to think. If, on the other hand, Dr. Kelly comes through as clearly as before, it will be an interesting proof for all of us. Nobody, I think, is going to suggest that a man can talk with his mouth full of water."

"It *would* be interesting, certainly," said Mr. Morton, "but please don't, simply on my account. . . ."

"No, I'm sure," said Mrs. Webster, "Mr. Morton doesn't want to make things more difficult than they already are. It's nearly ten o'clock, as it is."

"But if you don't mind," said Dawes patiently, "I really should like to try it. It will be as interesting for me as anybody. Such powers as I have are as much a mystery to me as they are to Mr. Morton. I welcome anything that helps me to understand further. I am groping in the dark as much as any of you. So suppose we try it?"

"If you wish," said Mrs. Webster. "Arthur, the jug and glasses are just behind you."

Mr. Webster poured out a glass of water and carried it to the medium. Looking at his pinioned arms, he hesitated.

"I'm afraid you'll have to hold it for me," said Dawes; "as you see, I'm helpless."

He lowered his head to the proffered glass, sipped once or twice, then filled his mouth.

"Mm," he said, nodding, his lips closed. He settled his head back against the chair, breathing deeply. In a few minutes the breathing had taken on a snoring note, and his head rolled sideways. Mr. Webster softly returned to his place and blew out the light.

Once more wrapped in darkness, Emma moved uneasily in her chair. She had watched the proceedings of the last few minutes almost drowsily, as though the light and movement had recalled her unwillingly from sleep. Yet she had been glad of the light, and was sorry to lose it again. It had restored Dawes to his proper proportion, had dispelled the image of Dolly that had so queerly possessed her. Now it was withdrawn, and the darkness pressed heavily on her eyelids. Yet it was, because of the break, less dreadful than before; she even felt slightly sleepy; she was getting used to it.

Mrs. Webster began singing, more quietly this time, and the others followed. Expectancy was less sharp, and the atmosphere, tinged vari-

ously with disappointment and relief, was easier. Emma was less consciously aware, by now, of Dawes, and let her thoughts return curiously to Dolly.

If Dolly were really present, here in the smothering darkness, unseen but close, what did she make of it? Could the power of their waiting summon her? Did she long to speak? It was easy to call up her image in one's mind, but was that the only presence that could be invoked? It was powerfully clear already—Dolly's face as it had been long ago, friendly and commonplace, curiously urgent and appealing in expression, a little foolish even, and pathetic. Impossible any longer to be afraid of her. Emma closed her eyes.

As she did so a cool breath struck her right cheek and was gone. She started, then sat alertly still. The room was hot; where had that cold breath come from? Under the singing she heard the medium moan.

"That's better," said a clear hearty voice from somewhere on her left, "that's *much* better."

The singing dropped to a whisper, then ceased altogether. Everybody listened.

"Is that you, Dr. Kelly?" said Mr. Webster.

"I should think so," said the voice, this time from a slightly different point, though it was difficult to say from where; "you've wasted enough time this evening."

"We're very sorry," said Mrs. Webster gently, "it wasn't our fault."

"I know that," said the voice, fading off abruptly. Very faintly, as though from a long way off, they caught the words "more power . . ."

"Is Dolly there?" said Mr. Webster anxiously, but there was no answer. Something that might have been a whisper came from the direction of the cabinet, but nothing more. Emma strained forward, listening.

"Dolly?" said Mr. Webster, his voice grown soft and pleading, "Dolly . . . ?"

The whispering voice spoke again: this time it was infinitely remote.

"We're trying," it said, "difficult . . . not enough power . . ."

The cold breeze wandered again across Emma's face and something brushed her knee. She shivered, flinching, but conscious of a mounting excitement which made her tremble. Somebody was trying to tell her something; not audibly, but with great urgency. Something seemed to expand within her, pressing against ribs and heart, forcing her to

some action, she did not know what, to speak, though no words came to her. A wave of compulsion swept over her, moving her to effort against an invisible weight, half drowning, half suffocating. She struggled to open her eyes, but the weight was on her eyelids, too. She could scarcely breathe. She was conscious of nothing now but a desire to succumb to it, though some fragment of her mind stood apart from the struggle, untouched and watchful. "Break free," said her mind scornfully, "you are imagining this." She gasped, struggling.

"There!" said Mrs. Webster in a thrilling whisper, "did you hear that?"

Her voice pierced Emma's consciousness with the suddenness of shock, and the nightmare left her. She was herself again, tense and upright on her chair, a little shaken, gazing open-eyed at the darkness. What had she been so nearly compelled to do, or what to say? She was completely at a loss.

"Dolly," said Mr. Webster's voice, mournful and gentle, dreading disappointment, "is that you, dear? Can you hear me?"

At the sound of his voice Emma knew at once what it was that she had wanted to do.

"Father . . ." she whispered. The sound of her voice frightened her, and she pressed her knuckles together. How dreadful, how dreadful; they would recognize her.

"Yes?" said Mr. Webster eagerly, "yes, my darling?"

"Tell Leonard," whispered Emma, not knowing at all, now, what she was going to say, "tell Leonard . . ."

But like the snapping of a string her nerve failed her, and she covered her face with her hands.

"I can't!" she cried distressfully, in her own voice, "I can't, I can't!" Seeking wildly for refuge from an intolerable moment she began to sob.

"Emma! What is it?" said Mrs. Shardiloe. "Oh, for heaven's sake, somebody, put on the light."

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Webster, beginning to creak, "what about the medium? We mustn't do anything suddenly. A shock during trance is very dangerous, you know."

"I don't care a damn about the medium," cried Mrs. Shardiloe. "Emma, be quiet! Oh, for God's sake, Majo, where are you? Can't you do something?"

Mr. Morton struck a match, and looked, not at Emma but at Dawes.

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"There!" said Mrs. Webster in a thrilling whisper, "did you hear that?"

Her voice pierced Emma's consciousness with the suddenness of shock, and the nightmare left her. She was herself again, tense and upright on her chair, a little shaken, gazing open-eyed at the darkness. What had she been so nearly compelled to do, or what to say? She was completely at a loss.

"Dolly," said Mr. Webster's voice, mournful and gentle, dreading disappointment, "is that you, dear? Can you hear me?"

At the sound of his voice Emma knew at once what it was that she had wanted to do.

"Father . . ." she whispered. The sound of her voice frightened her, and she pressed her knuckles together. How dreadful, how dreadful; they would recognize her.

"Yes?" said Mr. Webster eagerly, "yes, my darling?"

"Tell Leonard," whispered Emma, not knowing at all, now, what she was going to say, "tell Leonard . . ."

But like the snapping of a string her nerve failed her, and she covered her face with her hands.

"I can't!" she cried distressfully, in her own voice, "I can't, I can't!" Seeking wildly for refuge from an intolerable moment she began to sob.

"Emma! What is it?" said Mrs. Shardiloe. "Oh, for heaven's sake, somebody, put on the light."

"Wait a minute," said Mr. Webster, beginning to creak, "what about the medium? We mustn't do anything suddenly. A shock during trance is very dangerous, you know."

"I don't care a damn about the medium," cried Mrs. Shardiloe. "Emma, be quiet! Oh, for God's sake, Majo, where are you? Can't you do something?"

Mr. Morton struck a match, and looked, not at Emma but at Dawes.

Mrs. Shardiloe jumped up and bustled across to her daughter, who was crying noisily, rocking herself in her chair. Dawes, still roped in his chair with his head fallen sideways, stirred and opened his eyes. He looked at the match in a dazed way for a moment before it went out. Mr. Webster struck another and lit the red lamp; then, shading the match with his hand, stepped cautiously across the room and turned up the gas. Emma was sobbing now in her mother's arms.

"Are you all right, Mr. Dawes?" said Mrs. Webster, turning impatiently from the Shardiloes to the person who really mattered. Dawes nodded and grunted, not opening his lips.

"Swallow it," she commanded, remembering the mouthful of water; but Dawes violently shook his head. "Arthur, get Mr. Dawes a glass. He can't speak with all that water in his mouth. Oh, Mrs. Shardiloe, do make Emma stop that noise. It's most upsetting."

"I quite agree," said Mrs. Shardiloe tartly. "And who's to answer for it?" She stroked Emma's shoulder and gave her a handkerchief.

Mr. Morton reached behind him for a glass and offered it to the medium, who spat out a mouthful of water.

"What's the matter?" he said, when he could speak.

"It's all right," said Mr. Webster, busy untying the cord. "I'm not quite sure what *did* happen. The young lady's a bit upset, that's all." Mr. Morton replaced the glass on the table, frowning. (Now how had the fellow managed it?)

Emma was quieter now, and Mrs. Webster, reassured that no harm had come to Dawes, suggested that they should all move into the drawing room. "A good hot cup of cocoa will pull you together," she said, more kindly.

Mr. Morton followed slowly, casting a last searching glance at the medium's chair, now loosely festooned with cord, and at the objects lying about it. The trumpet was lying on its side in the middle of the circle; the tambourine and the dinner bell were, as far as he could judge, in their original places. Dawes, following him, intercepted the glance, and raised his eyebrows.

"Perhaps," he said, "when the excitement is over, somebody will be good enough to tell me exactly what happened?"

In the drawing room, comforted by cocoa and solicitous attention, Emma revived. It was clear that nobody had any idea of the real nature of the disturbance. Far from making accusations, they were hovering

around her as though she had performed some amazing and heroic deed.

"Really extraordinary," Mr. Webster was saying; "if the young lady's sufficiently recovered I should like to ask her a few questions."

"What, exactly, happened?" said Dawes.

Mrs. Webster cleared her throat, stirring her cocoa round and round; all eyes turned to her. Whatever she said would establish the facts; hers was the authority; it would be accepted. Gratefully, having caught a warmer gleam in Mrs. Webster's eye, Emma rested on this.

"Well, first of all," said Mrs. Webster, "Dr. Kelly came through. Not very much, I'm afraid, but quite clear at first."

"The voice was quite distinct, was it?" said Dawes, looking gravely pleased.

"Quite. He said: 'That's better,' in a really strong voice. Then it got fainter, and it was hard to catch. I was touched lightly once, on the arm, and I distinctly felt a psychic draught. Did anybody else?"

"I did, I think," said Emma. "A cold breath passing over my face. Would that be it?"

"Yes, that's right. We usually feel them. And then, after a bit, from somewhere on my right, I heard Dolly's voice. Not loud, but whispering, as she generally does. 'Tell Leonard,' she said, 'tell Leonard'—but she didn't tell us what. The voice was nowhere near the cabinet. It seemed, if anything, to come from Emma's direction." She turned to Emma, her face unusually gentle. "Tell us what you felt or heard, my dear."

Emma dropped her eyes. What should she say? She had an absurd impulse to laugh, to say: "Why, I whispered it, of course, you silly idiots. What do you suppose?" But under the respectful attentiveness of the others the impulse died. She was aware of the Websters' pleased expectancy, of her mother's facile appreciation of the drama, whatever she thought of it; aware, too, of Dawes's eyes upon her, curiously steadfast. She suppressed the warning thought of Mr. Morton.

"It's difficult to say," she said at last. "I heard all that Mrs. Webster did, and felt the cold breath and so on. And then, I don't know, a most extraordinary feeling came over me. I felt quite helpless, and rather frightened, like the beginning of a nightmare. Something seemed to press me down and pull me away . . . That sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?"

"Not at all," said Dawes, speaking with the authority of a doctor

recognizing symptoms. "I should say that you were quite clearly beginning to go into trance. Try and tell us exactly what it felt like."

"I can't. There are no words to describe it. It was unreal, somehow . . . rather terrifying. I tried to throw it off, to speak, but my voice wouldn't come."

"Tcha!" said Mrs. Shardiloe. "Poor child."

"I'd been thinking about Dolly," Emma went on. "She seemed very close. I almost expected to touch her."

"Did you feel any touch?" said Dawes.

"Yes. Once. On the knee. And then I found myself speaking, but without knowing what I was saying . . . almost as if it were not me at all. Then I got very frightened. Everything was slipping away. And I made a tremendous effort to get out of it, like you sometimes can with a dream." She put down her cup with a sigh. "And that's all. I don't know why I was crying. It was like waking up from a dream and finding yourself in tears. Silly, isn't it?"

"No, my dear," said Mrs. Webster, "it's very wonderful. You're too young, perhaps, to realize how wonderful it is. You must develop this power, Emma, my dear. It's your duty."

"There," said Mrs. Shardiloe, looking round her triumphantly, "I knew she was psychic. I always said so. Haven't I, Majo?" She turned to Mr. Morton for support.

"You have, certainly."

"Of course I have. Who should know her better than her mother? Why, ever since she was a child . . . Don't you remember, Mr. Webster, my telling you a long time ago?"

"I do. Indeed, I do. She is a wonderful acquisition to our circle. A powerful psychic. What do you say, Dawes?"

Mr. Dawes gave Emma a long look, forcing her to raise her eyes. She met his gaze guardedly, but found it warm with undisguised approval.

"I would say, undoubtedly, that she has the gift. Untrained and undeveloped, of course, but that's only natural. It's taken me years even to begin to understand my own small powers. I am still trying to understand them. Unlike Miss Shardiloe, I never had anyone to guide me."

Emma looked at him inquiringly.

"I would suggest, if Miss Shardiloe cares to, that we might sit together occasionally, quite quietly and informally, and discover what

there is to develop. Powers of this kind have to be drawn out, encouraged. Set on the right course, if I may so express it."

"Oh, that would be splendid!" cried Mrs. Shardiloe. "*Quite* splendid. She might turn out to be anything! And successful mediums make quite a lot of money, don't they? Why, you even have to pay half a guinea for a really good fortuneteller!"

Dawes frowned, and Mrs. Webster gave a grunt of disgust.

"My dear lady, that is not the point. Heaven forbid that your daughter should become a professional medium. Some of them, I dare say, are quite sincere, but there is always a temptation when money enters into it. I dare say," he said candidly, "that I could have become a rich man if I had ever attempted to prostitute my gifts, such as they are. It happens, however, that I regard them as far too mysterious and sacred. One tries to find truth, as a plant turns to the light. We are all seekers."

"Oh, well, of course," said Mrs. Shardiloe, convinced of vulgarity and dismissing with regret the pleasing vision of Emma set up in business in a comfortable little parlor with velvet curtains, a crystal, and a discreet brass plate outside the door: "Mme Shardiloe: Clairvoyante"—"oh yes, I quite see that. But it'll be nice for her to have a hobby, won't it? I did think once of putting her into the millinery business, you know, she's so clever with her fingers; but it all fell through somehow. I always said she was the clever one of the family, though Lily, of course, she's more *gifted*, but Emma can pick up anything, Mr. Dawes, if she only gives her mind to it."

"Oh, Mother," said Emma, jealous of the halo of importance beginning to surround her, not wanting it touched at any point by her mother's stupidity. She felt suddenly happy, filled with strength and peace. She glanced at Dawes, and was surprised to see him smiling. A tremor of sympathy passed vibrantly between them.

"Well," said Mrs. Webster, and rocked heavily in her chair, preparing to rise. Everyone suddenly perceived that it was very late, and began thanking her for an extremely interesting evening.

"We shall meet again soon, I hope," said Dawes, taking Emma's hand. "I shall rely on Mrs. Webster for that. You are a very fortunate and exceptional young lady." They filed into the hall, adjusting wraps and handbags, buttoning gloves.

Mr. Morton slapped his pockets in turn with a worried air.

"Bother it," he said to Mr. Webster's inquiry. "My cigar case. I

must have left it in the other room." Before anyone could offer assistance he had hurried back up the hall and down the two steps leading to the library.

The gas in the little room was turned low, but he made his way unhesitatingly through the circle of chairs, driven by the problem which had been revolving slowly and methodically in his brain for the last hour. On the floor in front of the medium's chair he distinguished the trumpet, the dinner bell, the tambourine. He picked up the bell, silencing the little clapper with his thumb, and sat down in the medium's chair, putting the bell mouth upwards, like a cup, between his knees. He ran an exploring finger round the inside surface.

"By Jove! Just as I thought," he murmured, examining his wet finger. "Well, well, well. A very nice little trick, prettily performed." He replaced the bell on the carpet, smiling to himself, and got up. Taking his cigar case from his pocket and holding it ostentatiously in his hand he strode quickly down the hall to join the Shardiloes, his heart uplifted with the sweetness of professional triumph.

Chapter VI

(1900-1901)

EMMA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH DAWES, DEVELOPING cautiously during the following months, established an undefined confidence between them. Each advanced in characteristic fashion—Emma mercurially alternating between enthusiasm and disappointment, not knowing what to expect—Dawes slowly and methodically, with purpose and infinite precaution. Each doubted the other, and drew comfort from this doubt; never directly expressed, it was gradually accepted and understood, establishing a bond which turned them from master and pupil into tacit confederates.

Their first meetings were unsatisfactory, held in the library under Mrs. Webster's eyes with tea and cakes. Emma, breathless and self-conscious, went over the Shardiloe version of her childhood experiences, and Dawes, gravely listening, nodded and made suggestions. She must, he said, at the same hour every evening, retire to her room, where she was to draw the curtains and sit or lie with closed eyes for a while, emptying her mind of thought. If "the feeling" came over her she was to give way to it, sparingly at first, then, as habit diminished fear, more confidently, with a determination to explore it to its limits. She was to keep a pencil and paper at hand and make notes of her sensations and any other phenomena that might present themselves—raps or creaks in the room, lights, images vividly emerging in her mind for no apparent reason, awareness of spiritual presences and so on.

For a few weeks Emma did as she was told, first with high hopes of sensational results, enjoying her new importance; then, as nothing happened, with a growing sense of foolishness and annoyance. Particularly she disliked her parents' attitude of vulgar curiosity when she emerged from these quiet sessions, her mother anxious for news of strange developments, her father frankly ribald. "Well, how are the spooks?" he would say when she descended for supper, looking dignified and ethereal and answering questions in a vague and faraway voice. "Do tell us,

dear," Mrs. Shardiloe would urge, frowning at her husband. "You know how very interested we are."

Against her father the best defense, she found, was his own level of banter, which sent him back chuckling to his newspaper, satisfied that the enterprise was what he suspected—another example of typical female nonsense. Her mother, professing sympathy and faith, was less easily diverted. "Now, come and have a nice cozy talk," she would say, patting the sofa beside her and radiating helpfulness and goodwill. "I'm dying to hear about everything that goes on, even the tiniest things."

"But, Mother, there's nothing to tell you yet. These things take a long time. One mustn't be impatient."

"Oh, I know. But doesn't *anything* happen? Your Aunt Nellie was asking only this morning how you were getting on, and I didn't know what to tell her."

"Don't tell her anything, please. Mr. Dawes says it's a great mistake to discuss it. I'd much rather you didn't."

"Oh, very well, then," said Mrs. Shardiloe, plainly offended; "I'm sure I don't want to interfere. I only want to be helpful. After all, I *am* your mother, and a lot of people wouldn't approve of your seeing so much of this Mr. Dawes without telling me about it. Supposing he tried to interfere with you?"

"He'd hardly do that in front of Mrs. Webster."

"Well, then, I don't see, if Mrs. Webster's always there why I shouldn't be allowed . . ."

"Oh, *Mother!* As soon as there's anything to know be sure I shall tell you. Please be patient."

"Very well, dear. Have it your own way. Only I *do* think . . ."

In self-defense Mrs. Shardiloe rebuked Miss Fairey's daily curiosity, hinting at trance conditions and secret developments which at present must not be known outside the family.

Dawes himself seemed to be in no such hurry. The barren meetings under Mrs. Webster's eye were a necessary preliminary; the time would come for fuller communication. He had got to be sure of Emma, as she of him. Confidence of this sort was a sensitive growth, easily bruised and shaken, to be drawn on steadily by imperceptible stages, not by forcing.

Their first meeting alone was in a teashop in Regent Street one Thursday afternoon in spring, the day when Websters' closed at one

o'clock. Neither had mentioned the arrangement to anyone, and both went with the feeling that it was, for all practical purposes, their first conference.

It was a brilliant afternoon, Regent Street full of carriages, alive with the murmur of strolling and shopping people. Dawes arrived early. He chose a table in a corner facing the door, placed his hat and gloves carefully under his chair and a bunch of primroses, which he had bought in Piccadilly, on Emma's plate. The refined and leisured atmosphere of the place pleased him, the sparkling china, the pristine tablecloth, the sugar tongs tied with a bow of pink ribbon, the gentle tinkle of tea-things and the pervading sweetness breathed from the bonbon counter. All other considerations apart, it was pleasant to be meeting a personable young woman in such surroundings as these; it made him feel already a man of substance, and he watched the door with a satisfied expression.

Emma came in hesitantly, squeezing with apology past a footman who was waiting in the doorway for his mistress and passing the time by examining the cakes in the window. She was wearing a big hat trimmed with violets and a veil drawn tightly down into a small knot under her chin. This veil gave her confidence. It was the mark of the grown-up lady, a shield of dignity, an extraordinary device of privacy which gave one the illusion of being partly invisible and therefore magically defended. She looked well in it.

Clasping her hands resolutely inside her muff she glanced doubtfully across the tables and saw Dawes. He half rose, and she threaded her way toward him with some of her mother's stately charm of movement, smiling demurely. "Good heavens," thought Dawes, taking her eager and self-conscious hand, "she's going to be beautiful." Somehow this possibility had never occurred to him, and for a moment it confused him; an undocketed fact which had taken him by surprise.

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting, Mr. Dawes?" Secretly she thought, with pleasure: "This is the first time I have ever been out alone to meet a man."

"Not at all. I purposely came early to secure a nice table. This place is very popular with the ladies."

Emma's smile faded, and she sat down, glancing away. Curious how one word from Dawes could prick the bubble of illusion that had swum so brilliantly when she came in from the street and breathed the sugary and romantic air of the teashop, full of soft talk and tinkling.

"He's common," she thought, "and quite old. If it were anybody else . . ." She looked down at the table and saw the primroses.

"They're not worth offering you," said Dawes, catching her quick look of surprise, "but they were selling them at the corner and I couldn't resist them."

"They're lovely," said Emma, lifting and smelling them penitently. "How kind you are." After all, it was ridiculous to come to this meeting as though it were a romantic assignation. And he *was* kind. Fancy thinking of primroses.

She delicately unbuttoned her gloves while he ordered tea and cakes. "China tea, please," said Emma, infected by the elegance of her surroundings. She was wondering what to do about her veil. Mrs. Shardi-loe always unraveled the knot under her chin and pushed it up in folds over her nose, a practical but unbecoming method. She looked carefully at the women at the other tables. Some of them had done precisely this, but one or two, the younger and prettier, had turned their veils right up on the brims of their hats. With some difficulty Emma managed this, and turned her attention to the business of pouring tea.

After a time Dawes said: "I'm most anxious, you know, to hear how you've been getting on since I last saw you."

"You mean, by myself?"

"Precisely."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I'm rather discouraged. Nothing seems to happen at all."

"Nothing *seems* to happen. That's not such a bad sign as you think." He smiled, stirring with his spoon. "What exactly are you expecting?"

"I . . . hardly know. It's so difficult to keep my mind a blank. My thoughts wander. I think of all sorts of things."

"Of course," said Dawes. "And you mustn't be afraid of it. What you want to avoid is a continuous train of thought, but if images present themselves, well and good. Do the same ones come to mind again and again, or are they always different?"

"Oh . . . they repeat themselves, I think. I think about Dolly a good deal, for instance, though I try not to."

"But why not? Hasn't it occurred to you that Dolly may be just as aware as I am of what you are trying to do and may be struggling to communicate?"

"Well, yes, it did occur to me, but the more likely explanation seemed to me that I was just thinking about her."

"My dear Miss Shardiloe, the more likely explanation is not necessarily the correct one. You *must* bear that in mind. At the first sitting you came to you gave definite evidence of mediumship and even Mrs. Webster never questioned that though the voice was perhaps yours, it was Dolly who spoke."

Emma played with her teaspoon and did not answer. Dawes puzzled her, yet at the same time she had a curious feeling that it needed no more than a word to bring them to terms. He had seemed in the beginning to offer her much; yet now, after several months, he was still withholding himself; trying her out, perhaps, but giving her nothing.

"You know," she said, not looking at him, "when I get discouraged, I wonder whether I really have the gift you think. I feel sometimes that it's all a mistake, and that I'm wasting your time. Perhaps I ought to give it up. Perhaps that would be best."

Dawes looked at her steadily.

"Do you want to give it up?"

"No. Quite the reverse. But I feel that I ought to be getting some results."

"There have been results already. It was results, as you call them, that encouraged us to begin."

"Oh, those. Yes. But the dreadful thing is, I'm not at all sure about that first time. And now, when perhaps I *could* be sure, nothing happens."

"My dear Miss Shardiloe, let us get this quite clear. You are telling me that you may have deceived us all at that sitting. Or do I misunderstand you?"

"That's more or less what I was trying to say. It's so difficult to tell. Do you never wonder sometimes, yourself?"

"I wonder," said Dawes gravely, "about many things, but not about that. I accept it. A medium is only a passive instrument, Miss Shardiloe, on which mysterious forces play. The more passive he makes himself, the more clearly can those wonderful forces be heard. It is fatal to doubt and hesitate over every step of the way."

"Yes, but that's just it. I'm not sure how passive I was on that occasion. Supposing I had just wanted to speak like that, and everybody had thought it was something else?"

"If you are really convinced of that," said Dawes, sitting back in his chair, "there is only one thing for you to do. You must tell Mr. and Mrs. Webster exactly what you have told me. You must tell them

that you deceived them on the impulse of the moment, and that there is no use in pursuing the matter."

Emma drew several small circles on the tablecloth, very carefully, with the point of her spoon. She had a brief vision of the explosion and ridicule which must follow so drastic a confession, and dismissed it indifferently. That was not at all the course she wished to pursue. If she possessed these gifts, which she doubted, she had a right to expect that now, under Dawes's instructions, they would make themselves clear. If not, and if she were right in supposing him to be under no delusion, she had an equal right to know what it was that he offered her. He had seemed at first to tempt her with the promise of power, and now he withheld it. And she had gone too far to turn back without humiliation, as he must know. It became suddenly plain that he did not trust her.

"I want you to advise me," she said at length. "I want to know what *you* think I ought to do. What you would do in my place?"

"I should go on," said Dawes, after a short silence, "without a doubt."

"But if you *had* a doubt?"

He smiled.

"Then I should dismiss it. Remember, these things come very slowly, very painfully sometimes, and when we least expect them. We must encourage them all we can, not hinder them at every turn by criticism and suspicion."

"Yes, but where does encouragement stop and falsehood begin? You see, even in my own short experience I'm not at all sure."

"It is sometimes a very fine distinction," said Dawes, "and better brains than ours have been puzzled by it. We feel that something is coming; we encourage it consciously; the phenomenon occurs, and conscience is satisfied. On another occasion we employ the same methods and nothing happens except that the medium is laid open to suspicion. That is the position, and to my way of thinking it is quite illogical. What is justified in the one case is justified in the other. The great essential is faith."

"Faith in what?" said Emma, now busy with the ribboned sugar tongs.

"Well, in several things. In the afterlife, for instance. In the reality of spiritual phenomena. In our own powers, however humble, to bridge the gap between this world and the next."

"Do *you* think I possess those powers?"

"I think it possible. You must be patient, remember."

"Yes, yes, I know," said Emma, "but what I am trying to get quite clear is this: You have been very kind, too kind, in taking all this trouble with me. But supposing you *knew*, supposing I *told* you, that that voice at the Websters' had been merely me, and nothing whatever to do with Dolly, what would you think then?"

Dawes met her eyes with apparent frankness, but there was a veiled hint of wariness in his gaze.

"I should probably think," he said, "that you still had great powers to be developed. My instinct tells me that, and long experience has proved that I am rarely wrong. On the other hand, I might think it my duty to tell Mrs. Webster exactly what you have told *me*."

Emma perceived the threat and slowly digested it.

"I see," she said. "And supposing, just for the sake of argument, that I thought it my duty to tell Mrs. Webster some of the things you have said to me this afternoon? About the fine line between encouragement and deception, for instance? What then?"

"She wouldn't believe you," said Dawes.

"Why not?"

"Because she wouldn't want to. People believe things because they want to believe them, and if the desire to believe is sufficiently strong, even proof is powerless to convince them. That is one of the beauties of faith."

"Some people might call it credulity," said Emma, thinking of Mr. Morton.

"Well, credulity, then. Human faith, or human credulity, is a very wonderful thing. All religions are based on it. By feeding and reassuring that faith we are doing no more and no less than every priest of every faith since the beginning of the world."

"But if we are leading anybody—Mrs. Webster, even—to believe something which may not be true? What am I to think about that?"

"My dear young lady, who are we to say what is true and what is not? The greatest philosophers in the world have not been able to satisfy themselves on that point. The Inquisition believed it possessed the truth; so did its martyrs. Both sides were wrong and both right. Even the scientists, to whom we pay such exaggerated attention nowadays, are constantly revising their opinions and contradicting themselves, even about such comparatively simple matters as medicine and

the physical world. So who are we to lay down the law about the spiritual world? The best that we can do is to have faith, and seek humbly for further knowledge."

"So you think it all right," said Emma, smiling, "to strengthen Mrs. Webster's faith by things—well, that voice of mine, for instance—in which you don't believe yourself?"

"I will ask you one question," said Dawes, "one question. What is a miracle? A miracle is a marvelous occurrence which confirms faith. The priest who performs it may know exactly how it is done, but *because* it confirms faith it remains a miracle. I will ask you another question. What is the good of faith?"

"I was going to ask that myself," said Emma.

"The good of faith is that it brings comfort to the person holding it. That is a very wonderful thing, Miss Shardiloe. You are too young, perhaps, to know how much unhappiness there is in this life, how much misery, how much loneliness, how much terrible despair. It comes to every one of us sooner or later, and only those escape who have some faith to cling to, the wonderful comfort of faith in an after-life, in reunion with our loved ones. If you are one of the few who can dispense that comfort you are very enviable, Miss Shardiloe. You ought to accept the gift with thankfulness, and use it to the very limit of your ability."

Emma was silent. She was not sure, even now, how far she understood him. Yet he had made it clear that he was under no illusion about herself: he had accepted her confession of deceit and brushed it aside as a thing of no importance. He would be neither angry nor disappointed, then, if she failed to produce the wonders that seemed to be expected of her. On the contrary, she had the impression that he would be astonished if she did. Yet in spite of this he seemed anxious to go on. Emma was mildly surprised at her own relief. By a look, a hint, a few words, he had lifted the burden of honesty from her shoulders, had made it clear that even without it she could have what she wanted.

Precisely what this was she did not know; she would not have said that it was power, since related to her own life the word seemed meaningless. But the taste of consequence enjoyed, the mystery, the difference that Dawes's attention had conferred on her, had the intoxicating flavor of desire half satisfied, and she knew that in this direction her impulse lay. To give it up now, to confess, to be dis-

graced and humbled, was unthinkable; so, too, the less sensational excuse of honest failure. It would be like asking a woman to turn back from the beginnings of love.

Knowing this, she had been uneasily anxious to grasp the true attitude of Dawes. He had dangled a strange toy in front of her, a toy she had already fingered and desired, since its possession was the compensation for which she hungered; and she had come to this meeting determined to find out whether or not she was to be allowed to keep it. The clue, surely, lay in Dawes's integrity as much as in her own. She had not known what to think, or what to believe of him. If he were genuine, and believed her to possess the same gifts as his own, the toy of power would be put out of reach as soon as he discovered her. If on the other hand he were, for reasons she could not fathom, a cheat, and for mysterious motives again wished to make her his ally, she was comparatively safe. The toy might not be all that it was supposed to be, but it was worth having; she would be allowed to possess it.

With the ethics of the transaction, with the reality or illusion of the Websters' professed beliefs, she was concerned not at all. She had hardly troubled to examine her mind on the matter. Such things might well be, or they might not: it was useless at present to try to come to a decision. What mattered was that vanity had been offered its food and disappointment its antidote; she had been shown a path toward which her taste for mystery had all along been leading her, even in the far-off secret days of childhood; and she had responded to it with the instant reaction of a swimmer who finds himself for the first time in deep water.

Emma had hoped, on the way to this first real meeting, that his terms would be plainly stated, but Dawes's sanctimonious reserve had shown her that this was impossible. If he were genuine, he had spoken exactly as she might have expected; if he were not, then he had merely refused to give himself away. He was no fool; but then, thought Emma, plainly neither was she; and thus far they had come to an approximate understanding. Each had let down the shutters a little way and taken a discreet look; they had exchanged threats, politely but unmistakably, as a sort of guarantee, and had confirmed their intentions as lying in the same direction. Dawes clearly expected something of her, though not what the Websters expected; it was easier and at the same time more complicated than that, and

not yet fully understood. But the sense of impending discovery which had troubled her since their first meeting had somehow resolved itself. He was not going to deprive her of the prize, but rather, for reasons of his own, to put it in her way. She felt immeasurably comforted.

A middle-aged waitress, rustling with starch, came in answer to Dawes's signal and made out the bill on a small pad suspended from her waist. Emma pinned the bunch of primroses on the front of her muff and began buttoning her gloves.

"There is one thing I should like to suggest, Miss Shardiloe," said Dawes. "I hope you won't think me impertinent, but you already know me too well, I hope, for that?"

"I hope so, too," said Emma.

"It's just this. Obviously, if we are to make any progress, we must meet alone, as frequently as possible. Should you have any objection?"

"None," said Emma, "but I don't know what Mother would think of it."

"Well, perhaps that could be arranged. Mrs. Webster has kindly promised me the use of her library at any time, and I am sure she would understand that concentration is easier when there is no third party present. As well as that, if you yourself have no prejudice against it and Mrs. Shardiloe makes no objection, it would give me great pleasure to invite you to my modest abode in Dulwich. My landlady is a very respectable woman, and perhaps, if Mrs. Shardiloe herself could be persuaded to come on one or two occasions . . . ? You see, Miss Shardiloe, undertaking psychic development is like entering on a long and arduous apprenticeship. It is far from easy, and one's success or failure depends upon many things. Atmosphere, for instance. Vibrations. Perfect sympathy and quiet. In my own development I have used my sitting room as a sort of laboratory. I am at home there. The conditions are very good. I should be much more confident of achieving results in *your* case if we could work there together, rather than at Mrs. Webster's, which, after all, is a large house, full of domestic comings and goings—not an ideal center of study, by any means."

"Well," said Emma, who knew exactly what her mother's reaction would be to this suggestion, but who also knew that to include her, however innocently, in the confederacy would be to win her over,

"if I were you I should make the suggestion to Mother rather than to me. You could easily make her approve of you more than she does. All you've got to do is to let her think she's a terribly important part of the arrangement, or even that she thought of it herself."

"Quite," said Dawes, with the beginnings of a smile. "Perhaps she would allow me to call on her? Say on Sunday. I feel it would be a mistake to let too much time elapse before we give your mediumship a chance in the regular circle. You must sit with us as usual, of course, as often as you can, and I believe we shall soon have some very interesting developments."

("Good heavens," thought Emma suddenly, "have I been mistaken all along? Does he really expect . . . ?") But there was a discreet, almost a jovial look of conspiracy in Dawes's eye as he spoke, and she smiled back at him, encouraged.)

"Yes, do come on Sunday," she said. "Mother would love that. And I'm quite sure something could be arranged."

At the bonbon counter Dawes made a gallant offer of chocolates, which Emma, already enveloped in her mantle of pythoness, refused. At the moment she felt too grown-up and ethereal for so childish a bribe, but a moment later, seeing a tray of tight little shiny sweets called satin cushions, relented, and accepted a small box which she put in her muff. Dawes walked with her as far as Oxford Circus and waited until the right omnibus pulled up at the curb.

"Thank you for a very pleasant afternoon," she said as the driver reined in and she turned to mount the step. Dawes raised his hat and stepped briskly into the road, crossing it obliquely in the direction of Princes Street. Seated inside the door, Emma watched him through the narrow arch of the stair, a compact and unremarkable man, walking purposefully on some errand she failed to imagine. Obsequious though he was in some ways, he had scarcely said good-by; simply raised his hat and walked quickly off, as though the unspoken bargain concluded between them were a matter of indifference. Some women, she thought—Lily, for instance—would have been offended; but not she; she was on the brink of something that Lily would never understand.

Feeling suddenly happy, Emma nodded and smiled to herself in the jolting bus.

Mr. Dawes's lodgings in Dulwich proved reassuring to Mrs. Shar-

diloe. Respectability breathed from the very furniture, and the landlady betrayed a gorgonlike hostility to her own sex which was all that one could wish. Mrs. Shardiloe had a shrewd eye for landladies, sharpened by the unforgotten hazards of theatrical lodgings, and experience told her that improper goings on could never even be contemplated under that gimlet gaze. She came and went without knocking, efficient, observant, and implacable, bearing unnecessary trays, as uncomfortable a watchdog as any mother could desire. Mrs. Shardiloe tried to charm her with compliments on the curtains and the maidenhair ferns, on the outlook, the quietness of the street, and the condition of the mahogany, and signally failed, drawing no response beyond a cool raising of the eyebrows—a delightful proof that here was a woman whom flattery could not bribe. She herself was less impenetrably armed, and came readily to the bait which Dawes offered.

“Your daughter’s gifts,” he said, “tell me, Mrs. Shardiloe, which side of the family does she get them from?”

“Why, I hardly know, Mr. Dawes. Her father doesn’t think anything of it at all. I’m the one that’s encouraged her all along. Even when she was a child, you know, very queer things used to happen sometimes. Very unnerving they were, too, before we understood them.”

“Quite. Naturally. Miss Shardiloe tells me you were really wonderful about them. You had an inkling, perhaps, of what it all meant?”

“Well, yes, I think I had. I’ve always been very interested in these things, you see. My mother had several warnings before she died, and I’ve always, right from a girl, had the most remarkable dreams. Really, if I were to tell you some of them you’d hardly believe it, how they turned out to have hidden meanings. My great friend Miss Fairey is very good at that kind of thing, and she says they’re quite extraordinary. She often says I ought to take up the crystal.”

“I think she is right. You might very well have a gift for it. I shouldn’t be at all surprised.”

“Do you really think so? I must say I’ve often thought of it. I have quite a gift with the cards, you know. Not for *long* prophecies, of course, but for about six months ahead I often think the cards are wonderfully right. Or don’t you believe in them?”

“‘Believe’ is a difficult word. Psychic powers manifest themselves in innumerable ways. We can’t accept one means and reject another.

Oriental seers, I believe, are able to predict the future from a tray of sand or even a glass of clear water."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Shardiloe, anxious to return to her own talents, "I shouldn't think that would be as good as cards, myself. Or the crystal. Where would one go, I wonder, to buy a crystal? I should love to try it."

Dawes smiled.

"I hardly think you could buy one. Not a genuine one, that is. But I have one upstairs which I use occasionally myself. Perhaps you would care to borrow it?"

"Oh, I *should*. How wonderfully kind of you! Are you sure you don't mind lending it?"

"Not in the least. I can help you, too, perhaps, in the best way of reading it. It requires a great deal of patience."

Dawes went off to fetch the crystal, which had been a source of much disappointment to himself, and Mrs. Shardiloe turned ecstatically to Emma.

"What an interesting man! You never told me he had a crystal. I thought he'd be bound to laugh at that sort of thing."

"Of course not, Mother. I can see he's delighted to find you take an interest. He's often asked me if you were psychic."

"Well, I shouldn't have said I was, dear, but I suppose you can never tell, can you? I think it's *fascinating*." Thus armed with a crystal for her private hours Mrs. Shardiloe became an ally and supporter.

She defended Emma now against her father, and Emma, secretly amused by the ease with which her mother let herself be played, made a feint of confidence, encouraging her to sit alone in her bedroom with the crystal reverently cradled in black velvet, gazing with an intensity that made her eyes water. Had the crystal clouded over at all as she gazed? Mrs. Shardiloe could not be sure. "Well, it will," said Emma. If her mother, half hypnotized by long staring at the subtle eye of light in the shadowed globe, fell into a doze, Emma was solemnly quick with interesting suggestions. Had there been images, dreams? What thought had suggested itself to her mind on waking? And Mrs. Shardiloe, whose waking thought was generally a cup of tea, would frown a little, trying to recover significance from the afternoon coma, and usually succeeding. They were happier together than they had been for years, and Emma pursued her apprenticeship unmolested.

The only discord in this domestic harmony was Mr. Morton's skepticism, but they were enjoying themselves too well to pay much attention. Besides, he had gone down in the world in recent years, falling from the music halls to the level of a mere entertainer who made his living out of children's parties and private engagements; not a very considerable figure nowadays. Mrs. Shardiloe snubbed him.

"You don't understand these things, Majo," she told him. "They're not in your line."

"But they *are* in my line, Susan. That's precisely the line they're in. It worries me to see you taking it so seriously, and letting that ridiculous little man get such a hold on Emma."

"He's being wonderful to her. Don't lay down the law, Majo. You must allow people their own interests."

"I do: and magic and deception happen to be two of mine. You must admit that I've had some experience in them?"

"Well, yes; but it's such an utterly different thing. You mustn't think that because you take rabbits out of a hat at children's parties that you understand what goes on at spirit séances."

"It's a help," said Mr. Morton.

Emma he found more evasive.

"Look here, Emma, I'm old enough to be your father. Won't you take my advice and leave the whole thing alone?"

"But why? It's so interesting. And important, too, don't you think? People know so little about these things. If only you had an open mind you'd help me, instead of trying to hinder."

"I am trying to help you. I don't like that man Dawes. I don't think he means any good."

"I don't like him much myself. But does that matter? He's doing something for me that nobody else can do, and I'm very grateful."

"What exactly *is* he doing?"

"Oh . . . you know perfectly well. You're just being perverse, you old silly. I believe after all these years you're getting jealous."

"Perhaps I am. I taught you your first tricks, remember. I don't like this competition."

"And I don't like the way you talk about it, darling Majo. Let's talk about something else. Tell me about Ireland."

Mr. Morton had just come back from what was now, by his present standards, a profitable engagement in a big house near Galway, where

his performance had been part of a lavish coming-of-age celebration. He had never before been farther west than Dublin, and had been moved to unaccustomed enthusiasm by the beauty of the country.

"It's lovely, Emma. You ought to go one day. I never saw better scenery. Fields and fields of wild iris, and water lilies growing wild in the streams. And the house! You'd never think it was a private house at all; more like a castle. Not very well kept up, perhaps, as it would be in England, but quite magnificent all the same. The day I left they showed me all over it, even the kitchens. Splendidly appointed they were, too, in a medieval sort of way. Excellent cellar. They must have a lot of money. I believe they pay their chef three hundred a year. A Frenchman, of course, and *what* an artist!" He turned up his eyes and waved his hands in the old appreciative gesture. "He was at work at the time and wouldn't even speak to us. Just barking orders at the kitchenmaids and shying the copper pans along the floor as he finished with them. Believe me, it was a circus."

"And was the food very wonderful?"

"My dear Emma, I can't begin to describe it to you. It—was—superb. Mind you, they grow all their own stuff on the estate and kill their own meat. I never tasted anything like the young lamb we had. Never."

"What else did you have?"

"Oh, everything. Oysters. A whole barrel of Galway oysters sent down specially for the artistes. Not very big, mind you, but delicate. Extra *specially* delicate."

Safely launched on his favorite topic Mr. Morton temporarily forgot Dawes, and Emma, prompting from time to time with idle questions, was free to remember him.

He was a disturbing and at the same time a baffling instructor, mixing apparent honesty with fraud in proportions very difficult to assess. He never said plainly: "This or that will generally deceive," but rather, "This method or that effect will produce a helpful attitude of mind in the sitters"—"will create favorable conditions"—"is very useful in inducing a receptive mental state," and so on. Under this polite fiction he taught her many things which she clearly saw were no more serious than Mr. Morton's tricks, but he blended them with advice of so apparently genuine a nature that she was never sure.

The finest type of mediumship, he assured her, was purely mental,

and for this reason it was of the first importance that she should not relax in her private efforts, should practice her daily contemplation and aim at a delicately balanced vacancy of mind—"like an empty room," he was fond of saying, "in which the faint whisper of psychic voices can be heard." "The feeling," that secret and terrifying sensation of childhood, was to be coaxed back and wooed for its own sake: she was to be afraid of it no longer, since it opened the vital door to psychic trance. Practice would bring facility; the experienced medium could, and at séances must, fall without effort or strain into this receptive state. Once passive, once slipping down that curious backward slope of consciousness which had long ago terrified her, she must respond without question to her inner promptings. What she felt impelled to do, she must do; if words came unbidden to her lips, they must be spoken. How else at present, said Mr. Dawes, could the spirits be served? She must regard herself simply as an instrument, guided by hidden voices; less simple manifestations might come later.

The curious thing was that she often did, now, fall into a vague state between sleeping and waking in which images pursued each other with the smoothness and inconsequence of dreams, and she would indulge an impulse toward odd disjointed utterances. Was this the beginning of trance? Mr. Dawes said yes, and urged her to pursue it. Puzzled, amused, occasionally timid, Emma obeyed him. After all, he knew more about these things than she did, and if he chose to call trance what the uninstructed might mistake for self-hypnosis or even common dozing, well, she would call it that too. And he might be right. There might well be splinters of truth among the dross, and the dross itself was not without charm and value.

The familiar backward-running sensation which had once frightened her she was still able to evoke simply by remembering; but it was still unpleasant, and she lacked courage to let it carry her to its unknown conclusion. If she let it take her more than a little way she became sick and giddy, so that she had to scramble back to reality by the old methods, pinching her arms, digging her nails into the palms of her hands, recovering with the relief of someone who has swung out over a feared abyss, and at the desperate moment clung back to branch and crag. There was always the doubt, too, as to what it might be. If it were a physical weakness it was a treacherous one: if, as she sometimes believed, it was the trance that Dawes so confidently spoke of, it was no less dismaying. She discussed it with him sometimes

but gave way to it rarely. It remained an uneasy possibility at the back of her mind, a nasty pill to be taken only in emergency.

The practical side of Dawes's teaching entertained her, though by this time she knew him too well to smile openly at his diverse and quaint devices for encouraging faith. Was it possible that people were really so credulous, so stupid? The answer was, apparently, that they were; faith was the logical fruit of the will to believe; and if the will were absent they were still touchingly naïve and unobservant, seeing only, as Mr. Morton had always said, what they thought they saw, loving the marvelous more than the prosaic, rejecting sense in favor of awful wonders.

In her first sittings with the Websters as a novice medium Emma was sometimes touched by panic, unable to believe that even in darkness they would not guess what she was at, and angrily denounce her. But they never did. They accepted the whispered communications, the soft touches on cheek or knee, the childish tinkling on tambourines with devout enthusiasm, with gentle pride in their sponsoring of her genius. At the first experiment she had suffered from a feeling of guilt, dismayed to find herself so irrevocably on the other side of the fence from these trusting people, mocking their trustfulness while she pretended to serve them; but the feeling was short-lived, stifled by the excuse that they found such lavish comfort in what she gave them. Even had she wished it, she would not have had the heart to undeceive them.

From the beginning Dawes had laid stress on what he called "test conditions." In practice these were laughable, but they served the main purpose, which was to promote faith. It was desirable to have the room minutely searched before a sitting, since everything necessary could be hidden on the medium's person; to be bound into one's chair with cord, since escape was easy and it scarcely hampered one's freedom. "It is necessary, of course," he said, "to be free in every way; but it is also necessary to give the sitters confidence." Under his guidance she learned how to sit in her chair at the moment of tying, well forward, muscles secretly braced, so that by relaxing and shifting back under cover of darkness the slack of the rope became available, and escape a mere matter of practice. Getting back into the ropes was more complicated, but not impossible, and here, as Dawes pointed out, her sex would help her. "No gentleman," he said, "will ever tie a lady tightly, and the ladies themselves rarely offer to do it." He

warned her seriously, however, against Mr. Morton. "A narrow-minded man," he had, "a hostile influence. Quite the worst type of person to have in any circle." Accepting this warning, Emma did not tell him how little she needed it.

During the spring and early summer she learned many interesting things, and came to look forward to the Websters' circle with the nervous excitement of an actress before a difficult performance. Not that the performances themselves were particularly arduous—she soon observed that the Websters were satisfied with the simplest trifles—but her awareness was always keyed to a high pitch of suspense, released only at the very end of the sitting, when vanity received its due reward. Darkness, she found, was in innumerable ways her friend. Not only was it a cover for all movement, but it produced in the sitters a frame of mind far removed from daylight and the normal. They were confused, nervous, eager; feeling themselves helpless and close to the unknown they were easily startled, easily convinced; they brought an awed and religious mind to her simplest experiments. They no more thought of questioning her integrity than they would have done of interrupting in church; the prayer with which each sitting began, the hymns that so helpfully drowned any clumsy movement, were her best allies, inducing a reverent expectation which it was a pleasure to fulfill. And such little things delighted them! Dolly's voice, produced now here, now there by whispering through the cardboard trumpet—what a satisfaction it was to hear their ardent responses! Really, when anything gave such joy and consolation, how in the world could one think that it was wrong? And of course there was always the chance that it was genuine. Why should it not be Dolly's spirit prompting her? These messages and endearments were never thought out beforehand: who was to say what called them, then, to mind?

The Websters certainly never questioned her honesty; neither did Miss Fairey, now an earnest and valued member of the circle; nor Mrs. Shardiloe, who fostered her reputation with professional pride; and Dawes brought to the sittings an air of scientific inquiry more convincing than any personal support. Emma gradually fell in with his style of devout bewilderment, waking from trance with a childlike eagerness to know what had happened during her unconsciousness, half timidly asking for explanations of what she was not supposed to understand. Fatigue, she found, was expected of her at the end of these

sittings, and this in itself proved excellent defense, an excuse to lie down with eyes closed while the discussion went on, or even to sit head in hand, complaining wearily of headache. Who could question you if you professed complete ignorance of what had happened, and were yourself the questioner? And when any of the sitters claimed to have felt a mysterious presence standing near them, or to have seen a faint light about the level of the picture rail, one's curiosity could be genuinely unfeigned, one's surprise honest. In point of security she was in a stronger position than Dawes, being one of the family, and in a sense the Websters' own discovery: a professional medium ran the risk of suspicion, but one's daughter or daughter-in-law was like Cæsar's wife, as unlikely to be accused of fraud as one's relations of pilfering.

The one skeptic refusing to be drawn in was Lily, and even her disbelief was mild and scarcely expressed, an impatience, rather, with the trivial activities of a younger sister. Lily had her baby to occupy her, and her absorbing household, and was proud and worried over the enlistment of Leonard. "I can't be bothered," she said in answer to her mother's pressing suggestion that she should join the circle. "You tell me about it afterwards, there's a darling." And Mrs. Shardiloe, nothing loth, would describe her own sensations and elaborate the spirit messages received, and puzzle over the few sittings at which nothing happened. "One can't force these things, of course," she would say; "it all depends on the spirits; one can't expect to be lucky every time." Emma had discovered that occasional failures were valuable.

Leonard had done as Dawes expected, and joined up. He was not happy about it, being too much in love to relish the idea of leaving home; but he was also not happy in being outside a movement which had absorbed so many of his contemporaries. Uniform soothed one part of his uneasiness, and Lily's pride in his correctness made the coming parting slightly easier to bear. The notion of death hardly entered into it at all; he thought of the separation as a period of honorable discomfort, to be faced with the cheerful assurance of duty done.

He did, however, in the last weeks before his regiment was drafted to South Africa, come to two of the séances at his parents' home, and in a more than usually subdued and respectful mood, not admitting his reasons. They were successful sittings, though at the first a sudden nervousness on Emma's part made her incapable of anything

more than the appearance of trance. At the second, however, the patience of months was rewarded, for Dolly appeared faintly but unmistakably to her mother, and Leonard went off to his troopship strangely comforted.

It was some time, now, since Dawes had broached the subject of materialization to Emma, and the sitters had been prepared by long expectation. In discussing it beforehand Dawes himself had for the first time betrayed embarrassment, and Emma had privately enjoyed his obvious dilemma. Nevertheless, while making every preparation for fraud, he had never quite admitted it.

"So far as we know," he had said, "the chief way that spirits materialize is by shaping a mysterious substance into their own image. Some people call this substance ectoplasm, but nobody really knows anything about it except that it sometimes emanates from the medium during trance. Occasionally, I believe, it is faintly luminous, but as far as my own experience goes it has never been clearly seen without some artificial aid. And that is where the difficulty comes in, for light is injurious to it, and forces a sudden absorption back into the medium, often with serious results. It would be an excellent thing from the scientific point of view if one could observe it in the light; touch it, even, and examine it. Unfortunately at the present stage of research that is impossible."

"So?" said Emma.

"So we do the best we can with a form of light which enables us to see it, but which is not strong enough to harm or disturb the substance. We use a little luminous paint on a slate or board. So far, at least, that is the most satisfactory method."

The luminous slates, he explained, were placed face downwards on the carpet at the beginning of a sitting; sometimes the spirits picked them up in an apparently playful manner, causing them to float about the room, or even turning the phosphorescent side to the sitters' faces, so that the faint glowworm effulgence dazzled their eyes after the long darkness, and it was they, not the spirits, who became visible. Or, more favorably, when there was sufficient psychic power to allow the experiment, the spirits lifted the phosphorescent squares to their own faces, and for a few seconds revealed their mortal image.

So far so good; but here Dawes found himself in something of a difficulty. In order, he said, to arrive at the best possible conditions, it was often helpful to encourage the phenomenon by simulating it.

This produced a valuable mental response in the sitters, and might almost be said, in all reverence, to give the spirits a practical notion of what was wanted. Also, it was equally possible that they might prefer to work that way; so that if, during trance, one felt an impulse to lift the slate and illumine one's own face, it was foolish to resist it. "Ectoplasm or the medium's own features," said Dawes, "who is to say which is the better material?"

For a moment his look was full of hidden meanings; anxiety, craft, pride and a sort of intimate mischief struggled below the surface of his gravity and almost emerged; but the old blank and decorous expression triumphed, and Emma stifled an impulse to catch his arm and say, "Come, be frank! Tell me exactly how we do it." This was not, she knew, the way to tackle him. Even at this stage a formal defense had to be maintained, since at any moment retreat might still be necessary.

Preparations for this séance were made with suitable seriousness; rather, Emma thought, as though they had been two children devising a momentous game. Her amusement soon lost itself, however, in anxiety for success. She had ceased to feel any conscience in the matter of deception; she was too closely involved in the part she played, and Dawes's consistent seriousness had cast its spell. She would have been hard put to it, now, to measure the full extent of her own skepticism. And if the thought ever occurred to her that Dawes was in her power, she was in his also. Still ignorant of his motives, she now possessed her own; less clearly defined, perhaps, but deeply ingrained with vanity and pleasure. Since his safety was her own, the fiction must be maintained and Dawes preserved. She was, she knew, committed.

Nothing was said on this particular evening to suggest that any special result could be expected. The luminous slates had been laid out on previous occasions, and once or twice had raised themselves from the floor, dim little barely distinguishable oblongs which swayed and hesitated. "When conditions are right we may get something," Dawes had said, "but we mustn't be too optimistic."

The room was arranged as usual, except that the circle was a little more closely drawn: Mr. and Mrs. Webster, Leonard, Mrs. Shardiloe and Miss Fairey were the sitters. Emma now sat in a place of honor at the left hand of Dawes, a couple of feet from Mr. Webster and with her back half-turned to the cabinet. She seemed withdrawn and pale,

with the talented consumptive look which black clothes gave her. Mrs. Shardiloe deplored the black dress, severe and without ornament of any kind, which Emma now affected, though her stage eye acknowledged its essential rightness. "It makes you look so ill, dear," she said; "you're too sallow for black." Emma had insisted that a light or colored dress was mentally disturbing.

They began as usual. "Our Father, which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name . . ." The prayer done, Dawes methodically tied Emma's wrists to the arms of her chair, passing the rope several times around her full skirts and the staves and once across her chest.

"Are you sure you want to be tied this evening, dear?" said Mrs. Webster kindly. "You really don't look at all well."

"Yes, I think I'd rather," said Emma, "I've got quite used to it, you know. It doesn't bother me." She looked very thin and fragile under the ropes, but she smiled encouragingly. "It's really rather comfortable," she said. "It holds me up."

The lights were turned out: first the yellow blade of gas in its china globe, then the little red-shaded night light which so strangely fantasticated shapes and ignored all detail, illuminating only a few objects apparently at random—a wing of Mrs. Shardiloe's fair hair, Leonard's high white collar, Emma's shadowed and prophetic face. They began to sing, and Emma sat still in the dark, performing the ritual of making her mind a blank, sinking back into the thoughtless void from which she believed she gathered mysterious strength. This process, now a habit, had become necessary: without it the performance would have appeared in its true colors, shaking her nerve and paralyzing invention. By this immediate step she was able to arrive at a state of detachment and awareness which had little to do with daylight channels of thought. She could emerge with senses sharpened and pulses curiously steady, consciousness narrowed to a pinpoint of attention on the task before her.

Cautiously, taking her time, she moved an inch or two back in her chair, testing the slack of the rope. It presented no difficulty. After a minute she had worked her left hand free and was passing it exploringly over the twists of the cord, feeling and remembering. Then she loosed her other hand and drew the cord away from her shoulders and down her skirts, gathered it together and put it carefully under her chair.

The voices of the sitters dwindled at the end of their hymn. Emma

sat motionless, breathing with slow and deliberate sound through her mouth. There was no need to hurry. All that she intended to do could be done in a few minutes, and the sitting would last an hour. She could be both frugal and leisurely.

After a pause the singing began again, and with one half of her mind she listened critically, identifying the voices. Her mother's rose effortlessly above them all, confident, melodious, a little vain; she knew the words now of all their favorite hymns, and enjoyed this part of the sitting. Mrs. Webster's voice was powerful too, though in a different way; nasal and authoritative, it was always a syllable behind or in front of the others, as though bent on establishing a separate and disagreeable personality, the voice that rises from one pew in every church in nagging difference. Miss Fairey's voice was faint and breathy, Leonard's apologetic. Mr. Webster came in fervid gusts, devout and flat. Dawes was inaudible. She knew he was watchful and still on her behalf, and drew comfort from this knowledge.

During the singing of the third hymn she reached warily in front of her to where she knew the cardboard trumpet would be standing, mouth downward on the carpet. Her fingers closed round the narrow end. She lifted it and waited. This was the propitious moment, when the sharpness of attention had had time to relax and expectancy was growing a little anxious. She crouched forward nearly into the middle of the circle and blew a gentle but increasing breath down the cardboard tube, moving it in a half-circle from left to right so that the cold air would strike upwards across the faces of the sitters.

"There! I distinctly felt a psychic draught," said Miss Fairey instantly. "Did you feel anything, Susan?"

"I think so," said Mrs. Shardiloe out of the darkness. "I'm almost sure I did." Everybody had suddenly stopped singing, and Emma stayed where she was, without moving.

"Don't stop singing, then," said Mrs. Webster sharply, "or we shall lose power." She cleared her throat glutinously and led off into "Onward, Christian Soldiers." Emma crept back into her chair.

They sang it right through to the end while she sat still. She had taken her left foot out of its shoe and had poised it over one of the little luminous boards lying face downwards on the floor. The ball of the big toe rested lightly on the wood and the toes stood up stiffly, waiting for a quiet moment. When it came she pressed sharply

on the joint, which gave an audible crack, magnified by the board to about the same resonance as a modest knock at the door.

"Yes?" said Mr. Webster, "who is that?"

Emma delivered several raps in succession.

"Is it Dolly? Is it you, dear?"

Emma did not move.

"Please give us one rap for 'yes' and two for 'no.' Is it you, Dolly?"

Two decided raps.

"Is it Dr. Kelly?"

Again two raps, though this time more faintly.

"Is it?"—Mr. Webster was still deferential and polite, though with an undertone of disappointment, "is it Moon Flower?" Moon Flower was the spirit of a Red Indian maiden who had come through frequently of late: so frequently that Dawes said she clearly wished to establish herself as Emma's control.

Emma's toe-joint cracked once, quickly and decisively.

"Good evening, Moon Flower," said everybody. Dawes had taught them that the spirits, like everyone else, appreciated courtesy.

Emma lifted the trumpet to her lips and turned it slowly in the direction of Mr. Webster.

"A good song," she said, in the soft clipped voice in which Moon Flower always spoke.

"Do you like it, Moon Flower?"

"I like, very much. Dolly like also."

"Does she? Is Dolly here?"

"Dolly beside me. She say, be patient. She try to do something for you. She say, hold hands, sing more loudly." Emma set down the trumpet beside her chair and slipped her hand under her skirt, feeling for something stuffed in the top of her stocking.

"Here, take my hand, Miss Fairey," said Mr. Webster, feeling about, "we must all take hands. Mrs. Shardiloe, do you hear? We must take hands all round."

Emma stepped silently into the middle of the circle, and Dawes, clasping Mrs. Webster's left hand in his right, leaned across Emma's vacant chair and laid his left hand on the further arm of it. After a little feeling about Mr. Webster encountered his fingers and gratefully clasped them. They began singing a noisy hymn and Emma felt on the floor for the luminous slates. They each had a flat loop of tape tacked to the unpainted side. Finding the nearest one she slipped

her fingers under the loop, and after a pause lifted the board slowly a few inches from the carpet. It swayed in the air, a faint oblong of greenish light, visible, but illuminating nothing. Hestitating, it wavered erratically upwards in the direction of Mrs. Webster and hovered uncertainly a little below the level of her face.

The glow-worm rays finding something to reflect them, Mrs. Webster's features, ghostly and amorphous, became visible to Emma, the eyes fascinated, staring, the mouth opening and shutting in a grotesque tunnel of darkness as she sang. It was borne in on Emma that in the midst of her deep excitement Mrs. Webster was afraid.

She had stopped singing now, and her mouth hung open, her eyes still fixed on the dim, moon-colored oblong wavering before her.

"Dolly," she whispered hoarsely, under the singing, "my darling, can you hear me? Speak to your mother!"

With her free hand Emma took the length of cheesecloth which had been hidden in her stocking and wreathed it loosely round her face, covering neck and hair; then turned the board slowly in her own direction, holding it about a foot away and a little below the level of her chin. She looked at Mrs. Webster.

For a moment before the dazzled eyes of the older woman there swam on the darkness a face of disturbing beauty. Half veiled in trailing cloud, deceptive in outline and mysteriously translucent, it looked at her with a sweet compassionate tenderness and seemed to smile. A young girl's face, half seen and fugitive, fragile, disembodied, terrifying, wonderful.

"Dolly!" she whispered, "oh my child, my darling . . ."

She leaned forward in a kind of anguish, and in that instant the slate wavered, turned its luminous side briefly in her direction and fell with a clatter. Mrs. Webster burst into tears.

The singing broke off and Leonard and Mr. Webster spoke anxiously in the darkness.

"Mother, what is it?"

"Are you all right, Edith? What happened?"

Mrs. Webster creaked in her chair, feeling for a handkerchief.

"Oh, Arthur, do you mean to say you didn't see anything? She appeared just here in front of me, perfectly plain. Perfectly plain, I tell you! I think she was going to speak, too, only the power failed. It was so wonderful, I can't describe . . ."

She blew her nose tearfully, and Emma, holding her breath in the

middle of the circle and listening to the eager stirrings all about her, judged that most of them had loosed their hands. She crept cautiously back to Dawes and ran her fingers over him. He was sitting in his usual position, his hands clasped in his lap. She got back into her chair with a faint sigh of relief.

"We must try again," said Mr. Webster eagerly, "perhaps she'll come again. Did you see anything, Leonard?"

"A sort of glow; and at one moment, I thought, the side of a face. I wasn't really near enough, and it went so quickly."

"I didn't see anything at all," said Miss Fairey plaintively.

"Oh, Nellie, didn't you? I did," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "Something white, not a face exactly, but definitely something. Oh, dear, do let's sing again. This is wonderful."

"I think we'd better," said Dawes. "It may come again. I didn't see anything myself, I'm afraid."

They began to sing once more, and Emma, the difficult part of her performance safely over, turned her attention to small routine phenomena. She produced a number of raps and psychic draughts, climbed on her chair in stockinged feet and tingled the tambourine high above the sitters' heads, and tantalized them with a small luminous point which swam about apparently near the ceiling. This last was a device of her own, simple and very effective, a small piece of card painted with a luminous blob which she clipped to the rim of the trumpet and waved erratically over the heads of the circle while standing on her chair. At last she gave one or two cryptic Moon Flower utterances, describing Dolly's joy at having been able to show herself to her mother, assuring them that she was very happy and would watch over Leonard, and that the medium had given off an immense amount of psychic power and would be very exhausted.

Toward the end Dawes himself went into a light trance and Dr. Kelly came through and spoke words of encouragement and approval to the Websters.

"Best conditions we've had yet," he said. "I told you you'd see something one of these days, didn't I?"

"You did, Dr. Kelly. It was wonderful. I hope Dolly understands how happy she's made us."

"Of course she does. She's very happy, too. It makes us all very happy on our side. Another barrier crossed, in a sense. I ought to warn

you, though, to be careful of the medium. A lot of strength has gone out of her."

Emma had struggled back into her ropes, sliding an inch or two from the back of the chair to take up the slack and letting her head fall forward on her chest. Deep, deep trance, she thought. Make the mind a blank. Float backwards and away from all these people, far, far away where even their voices cannot reach. Sleep, she thought. Empty, dreamless, innocent, defensive sleep . . .

She moaned a little, fretfully, when they lit the lamp.

"She's coming out of it," said Dawes, laying his fingers on the pulse at her wrist, "but wait a minute before you light the gas. Bright light's always a shock. Perhaps Mr. Webster would help me a moment with this knot?"

Released from the supporting cords Emma fell heavily forward and Mr. Webster caught her in his arms.

"Easy," he said, "easy does it."

She sighed and opened her eyes.

"Mother?"

"Yes, dear. Here I am. Are you all right?"

"I . . . think so. Let me lie down, please. I shall be all right in a minute."

They supported her to the horsehair couch where she lay back with eyes closed, frowning.

"Get her a drink of water, Arthur," said Mrs. Webster, "and some sal volatile. It's in the bathroom cupboard, left-hand side, in a cough mixture bottle."

Leonard lit the gas and they gathered round her anxiously. Mrs. Webster sat down tenderly on the couch, her black bombazine body pressing against Emma's thigh, and took her hand.

"There," she said, "there, poor child. You must be exhausted. Can you remember anything of what happened?"

"No," said Emma. "What did? I had a sensation of falling . . . It seems to have given me a funny sort of headache."

"I'm not surprised," said Dawes. "Drink this, Miss Shardiloe. We've had the most wonderful results, you know. You ought to be very proud."

"Let *me* tell her," said Mrs. Webster. "Listen, dear. Dolly appeared to me, quite clearly, a perfect materialization. Nobody else saw her,

but I can swear to it. Just her face, but perfectly distinct, and so close I could have touched her."

"I saw something, too," said Leonard, "but not as clearly as Mother did. And there were several other manifestations as well; lights, and noises."

"Good gracious, yes," said Miss Fairey, "the raps were *very* clear, and at one moment the tambourine floated right up to the ceiling! And I distinctly felt a psychic draught, twice, and I *think* I saw a bluish light floating about, rather high up, but I'm not sure."

"I saw that," said Dawes. "Most interesting. There certainly seemed to be a great deal of power this evening."

"Never saw anything like it," said Mr. Webster. "It must be having the two of you together; don't you think so, Dawes?"

"I do indeed," said Dawes candidly. "I can't think of any other explanation."

They continued to treat Emma with proud solicitude, like a distinguished invalid, and Mrs. Webster, still tearful and exalted, insisted on sending her home with her mother in a cab.

"It's been a very wonderful experience," Leonard said, parting from Emma at the door with a half grateful, half embarrassed air. "It's given me something to think about, you know. I shall never forget it."

A few days later, in precarious spirits, he sailed from Southampton, and Mrs. Webster gave Emma a gold chain bracelet.

Emma had several dreams about Leonard after he had gone, nondescript dreams mostly, trivial meetings and conversations in which she tried to find some deeper significance. He wrote to her once, a colorless letter describing the Cape Town scenery and the terrific heat, ending with conventional messages to Mrs. Shardiloe. This letter she put away in her jewelry box under a piece of velvet, often rereading it in bed when she could not sleep. It was a hot summer. The Brixton garden dried into black dust and the variegated laurels became black and gritty. Mrs. Shardiloe spent much of her time lying on her bed in a kimono, complaining of her legs. She was growing corpulent, and her spoiling looks depressed her; her mournful irritability tried everyone's patience.

Unruffled alike by the heat and her mother's ailments, Emma was absorbedly happy all that summer. She was less often at home than at the Websters', to whom, as they said, she had become a second

daughter, knit to the family with a special intimacy which Lily did not share. They treated her with the same affectionate respect that they accorded Dawes, and with more tenderness, so that she sometimes even wondered if Dawes were jealous. If he were he did not show it, but appeared satisfied to pursue his own mysterious courses.

Emma's mediumship, it seemed, was now established, and in her own circle she enjoyed an importance beyond her most sanguine dreams. Nothing, in the Websters' view, could be too good for her; they clothed her in a flattering legend of mystery and power.

"If you're so wonderful," Lily said to her, irritated by what seemed to her their unreasonable deference, "why don't you go into this medium business properly, and make some money by it?"

"It's not the sort of thing you do for money."

"Oh, rubbish. Lots of people do."

"Yes, and what sort of people are they? Always charlatans. Or if they have any real gifts they eke them out with fraud for the sake of a living."

"Well, I don't know about that, but it seems idiotic not to get some good out of it."

"Can't you imagine there being any good except money? Mr. Dawes doesn't do it for money, does he?"

"No. But I should very much like to know what he *does* do it for. Leonard doesn't like him, you know."

"Perhaps not. But even Leonard has to admit that he's a wonderful man. Leonard doesn't take your silly attitude about it. I wonder he allows you to. He ought to have laughed you out of it by this time."

"On the contrary," said Lily, "it's I who do the laughing. At him, and all of you. So now you know." She went off very pleased with this parting thrust, which Emma remembered.

Early in the following year Leonard died in South Africa. Mr. Webster received the bald communication from the War Office, without any details, and the shock of his death was for the Websters blurred in a curious way by their anguished puzzling over the manner of his death. Why had they said "died," not "killed in action"? Had he been wounded? Was it conceivable that he was only missing? Mrs. Webster fretted unreasonably over this inconclusiveness, and Mr. Webster wrote a letter of inquiry to the War Office. "We could bear it better," they said, "if only we *knew*." Dawes told Mrs. Shardiloe that he be-

lieved they were afraid he might have been court-martialed and shot for desertion or cowardice.

"Good gracious, do you really think so?"

"It's possible, Mrs. Shardiloe."

"Well. I really don't like to think of it. I hope nobody mentions such a dreadful thing to poor Lily. Don't you think the War Office would tell them the truth?"

"On no account. These things are better left unsaid."

"There I agree with you."

Eventually, and apparently through some error, two replies arrived from Whitehall, one stating that Leonard had died of dysentery on the Orange River, the other that he was reported to have died of wounds. No further information was available. The mystery remained, but these two official letters brought home finally and unavoidably the fact of Leonard's death, and his parents bowed their heads to the blow as they had not done in the beginning. Lily bore it with more apparent calm, keeping her weeping to herself and refusing to go home to her mother or to Mrs. Webster, preferring to sit still in her house with a grim and destroyed face, accepting comfort from nobody. Like the Websters, though, she went immediately into mourning, and on the rare occasions when she visited them dressed totally in black, with not even a concession to vanity in the way of a white collar or a becoming veil, touchingly plain and utterly unapproachable. Mrs. Shardiloe's heart ached over these visible evidences of grief, and fretted helplessly because she had no comfort to offer and because Lily seemed to have turned into a stranger; but Emma after the first shock and sympathetic pang found something embarrassing in this combination of white-faced widowhood and frigid calm, and took pains to avoid her. She was disappointed in the extent of her own grief, and found Lily's mortifying. "She makes such a show of it," she thought. "She can't feel it as much as I do, really." She brooded for hours in her bedroom over Leonard's letter, bringing herself to tears and pressing her wet cheek against the paper; then becoming absorbed in her own face in the glass, ravaged and tear-stained, in all the luxury of sorrow. At night before sleeping she minutely reviewed all her memories of Leonard, and sometimes dreamed. "I believe he is trying to communicate," she told her mother.

She was on the point of breaking this disturbing news to the Websters when Dawes forestalled her. He had heard Leonard's voice

twice, he said, waking him from sleep, though not with sufficient distinctness to catch the message. He was making, he thought, a powerful effort to get in touch; he himself was conscious of psychic struggle disturbing even his waking thoughts, and Leonard's face came urgently before his mind's eye as he worked in the shop.

The Websters received this news anxiously, with a sort of troubled joy. They did not doubt that Leonard was trying to reach them; they would have been anguished and surprised if he had not; but their eagerness made them wincingly afraid of failure. So strongly did this fear work on Mrs. Webster that for the first few weeks after his death she refused to hold a circle. "I've got to get over it a bit," she said, "before I can bring myself to face it"; but really her reluctance was due to fear that the attempt might after all be fruitless. "I know I'm wrong," she told Dawes, in some distress, "but there are moments when one simply can't bear to put one's faith to the test." "I know, I know," said Dawes gently. "When the moment comes you will know it as clearly as I do. All I beg of you is, don't keep him waiting too long."

At length, as he knew it would, suspense became too strong, and the sittings were resumed. Emma and Dawes worked cautiously. Emma herself was now more than half-convinced that Leonard was trying to get in touch with her; the dissenting part of her mind she did not examine. Why should her thoughts be so constantly occupied with him if he were not there? There had always been unacknowledged sympathy between them, which death would now confess. She would relax, make herself receptive, listen only with the ears of the spirit and speak whatever words were put into her mouth. She would make herself his dedicated mouthpiece; she would become part of Leonard.

Lily's response to the first reported communications was angrily scornful. What nonsense, she said. How did they know that it was Leonard? "By his voice," said Mrs. Webster firmly, silently appealing against even the breath of doubt. "It wasn't very clear, you know, Lily; not much more than a whisper; but I know my own son's voice, I couldn't be mistaken. He said your name twice, dear, quite distinctly. Father and I really think you ought to come."

"Well, I shan't," said Lily. "I don't like Dawes, and I don't trust him. How do you know what he's up to?"

"Lily! After all the years that we've known Mr. Dawes! I won't

have you speak of him like that. Besides, the best results so far have come through Emma."

"Oh, her."

"What do you mean by 'Oh, her'? I don't understand you, Lily, really I don't. You go out of your way to hurt us. I know you feel his loss almost as much as we do, but you mustn't let grief harden you like this. At least you have the child to comfort you; remember that."

"It doesn't comfort me," said Lily, beginning to cry. "It makes it worse. Much worse."

"There, there," said Mrs. Webster. "I don't want to upset you; we've all got enough to bear, Heaven knows. All I say is, keep an open mind, Lily, and I pray that God will let you share in our comfort."

In the end, of course, Lily came, openly hostile to Dawes and detesting the whole business. Dawes treated her with a flattering and gentle deference, commending her courage and shaking his head skeptically over the results so far obtained.

"I am afraid," he said, "that Mrs. Webster is a little too optimistic. She's not in a frame of mind to bear disappointment, and that worries me, because the one virtue one has to possess above all others is patience. They are working for it on the other side, I'm convinced of that; but one mustn't expect to get good results in a hurry."

"I don't," said Lily.

"How wise you are. If only everyone would approach the subject in a patient, scientific spirit! I am afraid poor Mrs. Webster lets her feelings run away with her."

At the beginning of the séance Lily sat stiff and silent, avoiding Emma's eye. A little tremor of hostility ran between them. "I'll show her," thought Emma as the light went out. She closed her eyes, with all the force of her imagination summoning Leonard's image. She would let him direct all her thoughts and actions, control her movements, put words into her mouth. He would tell her how to convince and humble Lily.

After a time, soothed by the ritual singing, her mind's eye reconstructed him with unusual clearness; correct, yet somehow intimate, looking at her confidentially, carrying a small gold watch in his hand. "Extraordinary," thought Emma; "why should I remember that watch? I've never thought of it before." Suddenly it flashed upon her that

she had seen it that very afternoon, pinned to the black silk of Lily's bodice with a bow-shaped brooch. Of course: it was Leonard's watch that Lily was wearing: and the image that she had evoked from her memory had pointedly carried it. . . . She smiled vaguely and stirred cautiously in her chair, testing the ropes. Queer that that watch should have impressed her so vividly. It must be the clue to something, though she could not guess what. Her hands free, she unwound the rope with her usual noiseless care and began to feel around in the darkness for the trumpet.

The sitting progressed smoothly, with just the right heightening of expectation and emotion as the phenomena appeared. Phosphorescent points swam in the darkness, raps sounded from the floor and the furniture, and Dolly spoke with more than customary clearness to her father, announcing her joyous reunion with her brother, and his desire to speak to them.

"Leonard," said Mr. Webster in a queer voice, "Leonard, my boy? We're listening. Can you speak to your father?"

But Emma, her cheeks burning with the excitement of inspiration, had turned the trumpet mouth in the direction of Lily.

"Lil," she breathed, "my darling . . ."

The singing dropped to a whisper and then stopped altogether. She could hear Lily breathing.

"Lil?" she said again, on a questioning note.

"Yes?" said Lily at last, her tone frightened and unwilling. "Yes? What is it?"

"So hard," came the whisper at length, the safe, faint whisper which had no volume in it to betray the sex of the voice, "so hard to reach you . . ."

"I'm listening," said Lily, and something in her tone told Emma that she was straining forward in the darkness, and not far from tears.

"The watch," said the voice, "the watch you're wearing, Lil . . ."

"I know," said Lily, "it's the one you used to wear. I always wear it now."

"That's right," said the voice faintly, and for a time said nothing more. Mrs. Webster began humming softly under her breath, very guarded and alert, making little sound. Emma lifted the cardboard trumpet to her lips.

"I want you," said the voice, now sounding mournful and rather far away, "I want you to give it to her. For my sake."

"What, the watch? Who to?" There was a note of surprise but no warning in Lily's voice.

"Your sister, Lil. As a token. As a token that I . . ."

"Do you mean Emma?" said Lily incredulously, breaking the unwritten rule of the house that one never interrupted a spirit.

"Yes, yes; Emma. Give it to her with my love. I am still with her, tell her; very close. I was always close to her, Lil. I can tell you now because you will understand." Emma drew breath. "I see things so clearly now, Lil; I ——"

There was a sudden movement and a gasp in the darkness, then a sound of tearing silk and a clumsy blow. Lily screamed.

"You beast!" she shrieked. "Turn on the light, somebody! You devil! You devil! I knew it all the time!"

Movement and voices now joined in a general confusion, Mr. Webster blundering about after matches, Mrs. Shardiloe trying to reach Lily, Dawes's voice, sharp with anxiety, begging everyone to keep calm.

"Please sit *down*," he was saying, "any sudden light . . . injury to the medium . . ."

"Damn the medium!" said Lily violently; "she's no more a medium than I am. For God's sake light the gas and let me look at her." Encountering Mr. Webster in the darkness she snatched the matches out of his hand and fumblingly struck one. Emma was lying a little sideways in her chair, the rope somehow round her body and her eyes closed. Dawes put out a hand and roughly extinguished the match.

"I *beg* of you," he said angrily; "who knows what consequences ——"

"Leave me alone!" said Lily, in such a commanding voice that he did not oppose her in striking the second match. She went very close to Emma and held it in front of her face. Emma moaned, but did not open her eyes.

"Look!" said Lily viciously, "the rope's not tied! And look, her dress is torn where I caught her!" She snatched at the rent sleeve. "You devil!" she said, "you devil!" Choking with tears, she struck her full in the face. The match went out.

By the time that Mr. Webster had got the gas lit Dawes had removed the ropes and half dragged, half carried Emma to the sofa.

"Control young Mrs. Webster, somebody," he said sharply, "or I

won't be answerable for the consequences. This is a dreadful thing to have happened."

"I'm quite controlled, thank you," said Lily, panting a little and very white, "as controlled as *she* is, which is saying a good deal. You ought to go down on your knees and thank God, all of you, that you've found her out in time. *And* you," she added, turning furiously on Dawes, "you—you *criminal!*"

"Lily, Lily," said Mrs. Webster, "hold your tongue! What's the matter with you?"

"What's the matter with *you?*" said Lily. "You poor fool! My God, how she's taken you in! And what *for*, I should like to know? Torturing us all, so that the two of them can laugh at us. I've a damned good mind to call in the police."

"Don't shout," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "You've hurt your sister. How is she, Mr. Dawes?"

"She's coming round, I think," said Dawes. "Is there any sal volatile, Mrs. Webster? I don't like the look of her at all."

"Let me look at her," said Lily, pushing Dawes aside. She bent over Emma and shook her roughly.

"Stop pretending, you damned fool," she said. "There's no need to keep it up. We all know you're a fraud."

Emma opened her eyes in a dazed way and turned her face from the light.

"What is it?" she said faintly.

"Just that you've been caught out properly," said Lily loudly, "and shown up for what you are, in front of all of us. How *dare* you? You ought to be in prison for what you've done. I shall go to the police."

"You can't do that," said Emma weakly. "I haven't done anything."

"But what *happened?*" said Mrs. Shardiloe. "I don't see that you've any call to speak like that, Lily. How do we know . . ."

"Shut up, Mother. You know as well as I do what she was doing. *Why* she was doing it God knows; I don't. I think she must be mad. It's the kindest thing I can think. Raving mad, and ought to be in a lunatic asylum. She ought to be put away."

"Come, come," said Dawes, "you're overwrought, you know. Whatever you may have imagined—and we all realize what a sad state of nerves you must be in—you are doing no good by making a scene of this kind."

"That's right, my dear," said Mr. Webster, "no good at all."

"But don't you *realize*," said Lily, "how you've all been taken in, right from the very beginning? She gets some beastly fun out of laughing at you all, I suppose. And she *must* be mad. Nobody in their right mind would be so devilishly cruel."

Emma sat up painfully, resting on her elbow. "I'm ill," she said. She looked alarmingly pale.

"Now, look here, Emma," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "if what Lily says is true . . ."

"I don't know what she's talking about, Mother."

"Of course it's true!" said Lily. "*You* weren't taken in, were you, Mother? You couldn't be such a fool."

"Well," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "all I say is, if it *is* true, God help her, for I certainly won't. I really don't like to think what her father would say."

"Take her home and ask him," said Lily. "I'll come with you."

"I hardly think Miss Shardiloe is fit to be moved," said Dawes. "She's had a serious shock. A physical attack like that, when a medium is in trance, might have very serious consequences."

"Oh, don't *you* put your spoke in," said Lily. "We all know what to think of *you*."

"I think," said Mrs. Webster, subsiding ominously in her chair, "that Mrs. Shardiloe had better take Lily home. I'm not going to have this kind of quarrel going on in my house. Emma can stay here if she likes, and if necessary have a doctor. That's my final word."

"It's not mine, though," said Lily. "Mother, make her come. Haven't you got any authority? You seem to have gone all to pieces."

"Indeed I haven't," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "I was just wondering what I'd done to deserve such an upset. I feel thoroughly ill."

"Go and look for a cab, Arthur," said Mrs. Webster. "I say no more."

"I'm not going," said Emma faintly. "I can't get up."

But Mrs. Shardiloe, feeling angry and foolish, was now also suspicious.

"Oh yes, you can," she said. "You're coming home with me, and if there's anything wrong with you you can go to bed at home. I've had enough of this."

Seeing that Lily was about to help her mother in getting her off the couch, Emma stood up, pitifully swaying, and allowed herself to be piloted downstairs and into a cab. They drove home in grim silence,

Emma leaning back with her eyes closed, Lily staring fixedly out of the window, and Mrs. Shardiloe alternately weeping and taking headache tablets.

Robbed of the support of Dawes, Emma was badly frightened, and unable to resist the refuge of righteous anger. This was a mistake, for when they got home, and Lily, with her father for audience, renewed the attack, she defended herself with counter-accusations, abandoning the safer invalidisms which had alarmed her mother. The affair developed into a family quarrel of painful proportions, lasting until past midnight, when everybody with the exception of Mr. Shardiloe was in hysterical tears, Lily raving about the police and lunatic asylums, and Emma, who in the course of the row had lost her mother's confidence, wildly declaring that she would leave home in the morning, never to return.

It finally became too late for Lily to go home, and she spent the night with her mother, talking and crying. Emma packed ostentatiously, sobbing under her breath, noisily opening and shutting drawers and banging cupboards. By seven o'clock she had packed and unpacked her belongings several times and was dressed for a journey. She met Lily—already dressed and fussing distractedly about getting home before the servant should be awake—on the stairs, and passed her without speaking.

Emma would have been glad by this time to have forgotten her angry resolutions of the earlier hours; she was frightened and exhausted and almost prepared to be humble; but the frozen scorn on Lily's face as she passed called for a dramatic and terrifying answer. After a further few minutes of miserable indecision she wrote a note to her mother and propped it in a conspicuous position on her dressing table. Then she took the smallest of the many suitcases she had packed and walked quickly out of the house, not pausing to hesitate or even to think until she had reached the bottom of Brixton Hill and boarded a tram.

Chapter VII

(1901)

THE BOAT BEGAN TO ROLL A LITTLE, OMINOUSLY, AND Emma closed her eyes. "I am mad," she thought; "mad. I shall turn straight back as soon as we reach Dublin. What in God's name possessed me? And I am going to be sick as well."

After a time she opened her eyes and glanced nervously along the deck. Other people were ranged like herself in deck chairs and rugs, settled for the night: they did not look alarmed. Was it possible that they had not noticed the sinister swinging motion? The sea, it was true, had an oily smoothness which ought to be reassuring; but it was by no means flat. It lifted the boat slowly with rolling gentleness, tilting one's body and creaking invisible ropes, then lowered it shudderingly too far in the other direction, so that the dark horizon rose above the rails and a greenish lamplight trembled on the water. "Oh God," said Emma under her breath, "oh God."

It was extraordinary how other people appeared not to notice it. Perhaps they were used to the crossing, were confident that these motions and noises were nothing to be afraid of. Many, she knew, had already gone to bed in their stuffy cabins, and at this perilous moment, perhaps, were even sleeping. She envied them their indifference, but for reasons both of economy and caution had not been able to bring herself to take a cabin. The extra shillings were better in her purse, and besides, if anything happened, the deck seemed safer. Perhaps it was for safety that a few of the passengers were walking round and round the deck, passing and repassing her, apparently nonchalant but doubtless wary. It was a monstrous thing to trust oneself to the Irish Sea in the middle of the night.

A yard or two away in the next chair an old lady in a purple mantle had opened a parcel of sandwiches. She was unfolding the little packets it contained with suspicious attention, making a great deal of rustling. Presently she found what she wanted, and began with frank

enjoyment to bite the leg of a chicken. She looked round her with interest as she ate, and presently, her front teeth bedded in a drumstick, caught Emma's eye.

"Not feeling unwell, are you, my dear?" she said, pausing with the bone held between finger and thumb as though it had been a flower that she was smelling.

"Not yet, thank you," said Emma faintly.

"Oh, come," said the old lady, "that's not the right attitude. Are you a bad sailor?"

"I hardly know. I've never been to sea before."

"Oh, in that case you'll be as right as rain. Best time in the whole year to cross, September. I hope you made a good supper?"

"Well, no, I didn't. The saloon smelt stuffy. I suppose I really ought to have had something in Liverpool.

"Of course you ought, silly child. People only cross on an empty stomach if they're determined to be ill. Have a sandwich."

"Oh no, really, it's most kind . . ."

"Come along now," said the old lady, "I've got plenty, you needn't be afraid. Pull up your chair a bit closer and have some chicken."

Emma obediently unwrapped herself from her rug and dragged her chair along the deck. It was immensely comforting to have somebody to talk to. Of course, one shouldn't really speak to strangers at all, but the old lady, though odd, was almost certainly harmless.

"How very kind of you," said Emma, accepting a piece of chicken from an astonishing quantity in the old lady's lap. "I really don't see why I should eat your supper."

"Not at all. You see what a lot there is. It's supposed to be supper for three, but it would feed half a dozen." She picked up a bread-and-butter sandwich and took a powerful bite. "Traveling alone, aren't you?"

"Well, yes, I am," said Emma cautiously, "as far as Dublin." The chicken was really excellent. It seemed possible after all that her squeamishness had been nothing but hunger.

"I see. Your friends are meeting you at Kingstown?"

"No, not exactly. I rather think I shan't be met there."

"Well I never. How far are you going?"

Emma hesitated.

"I suppose I seem very inquisitive," said the old lady. "I am, of course. I can't help it. Always poking my nose into other people's

affairs, and I'm too old to change." She uncorked a bottle of milk and poured a small quantity into a horn cup. "Care for a drink?"

"No, thank you," said Emma, smiling, her own caution seemed both unmannerly and absurd. "As a matter of fact I don't really know where I'm going. I just decided to go to Ireland for a holiday."

"That's the spirit," said the old lady, tossing off the milk. "Pleasantest country in the world."

"I have a friend," said Emma, expanding a little, "who's been there recently, and he liked it very much. Still, it's rather different for a man, traveling alone. I rather think at Dublin I may turn back."

"Courage cooling?" said the old lady, with a delighted grin; "I'd be prepared to wager you've run away from home."

Emma stared at her.

"Well, I have, in a way. Not for long, though. I shall go back presently. How in the world did you guess?"

"Easy. You were obviously alone, and half-frightened out of your senses. It was written all over you."

Emma laughed.

"I still think it was very clever of you. You must have second sight."

"Not at all, not at all. I use my eyes. What have you done it for? A love affair?"

"Nothing so interesting, unfortunately. Just a family quarrel. I thought at the time that a change would do me good."

"So it will. A very proper ending to a family quarrel. I ran away repeatedly when I was your age."

Two young men who had been circling the deck from the moment of leaving Liverpool swung once more into sight, tramping the boards with sensible heavy feet. As they passed they smiled at the old lady, and the one in a Norfolk suit and spectacles raised his eyebrows.

"Come back in five minutes," she called after them, gesturing with the milk bottle, "there's plenty left." They waved familiarly and strode steadily out of sight.

"That's my nephew, Dr. Massingham," said the old lady, "and the other's his friend, a very nice young man. They come and stay with me because of the fishing."

"That must be very nice for them."

"It's just what they like. I do them very well, of course. I'm Miss Geraldine Dermot, you know, of Ballyknock. I live at Scatterry Castle."

"A castle!" said Emma, opening her eyes wide in interest and dismay. "How awfully grand!"

"That's just what it isn't," said Miss Dermot regretfully. "Nobody but an Irishwoman would have the effrontery to go on calling it a castle. There's not a single stone of the original building left. However, it looks well on the note paper."

"It must be very romantic," said Emma, not knowing what else to say.

"It's very uncomfortable," said Miss Dermot, "but it suits me. I've lived there all my life, and so it seems just right. I've seen enough of the world, though, to know that that's just another of my delusions." She unwrapped a neat parcel of dark plum cake and handed a slice to Emma on a clean napkin. "What's your name, by the way?"

"Emma Shardiloe."

"Shardiloe? Never heard of it. What part of the country does it belong to?"

"I've no idea. I used to suspect that my father made it up; a stage name, you know. But he would never admit it."

"Oh, is your father an actor?" Miss Dermot's odd little marmoset face was full of interest.

"No, he used to be a music-hall manager. My mother was a singer, but she's retired now. Susan Shardiloe, her name was. I suppose you never heard her?"

"Ah, my dear," said Mrs. Dermot, "my theater-going days were long before your mother's time. Music halls weren't so respectable then as they are now. I'm sure I should have liked them, though," she added wistfully.

The young men swung round the deck for perhaps the twentieth time, and Miss Dermot beckoned them with an authoritative finger.

"Come and eat your suppers," she said, "or we shall finish the lot." They came up, watchful and smiling. "This is my nephew, Dr. Massingham, and this is Mr. Parry. This young lady is Miss Shardiloe, she's running away from home. I feel sure we can give her a lot of valuable advice."

"I hope so," said Dr. Massingham, pulling up a deck chair; "it's a difficult subject, though, isn't it? Can't say I've had very much experience."

He looked at Emma pleasantly through his spectacles. He was younger than she had at first sight supposed; twenty-eight, perhaps;

the heavy mustache and spectacles had been misleading. Now she saw unmistakable youth in his fair rosy skin and curly hair; there was an ordinary niceness in his face which was attractive and comforting.

"It wather depends on where you want to wun to," said the other young man, the small and dark one, helping himself to chicken. "Has the young lady quite made up her mind on that point?"

"No," said Emma, "that's the trouble. It was worrying me so much that I'd more than half decided to go home."

"That might after all be the sensible thing, you know," said Dr. Massingham kindly. "The most important part of running away is to have a pleasant destination."

"Well," said Miss Dermot, "and what could be pleasanter than the west of Ireland? Write a nice reassuring letter to your family from Dublin, and then keep on running away until you get to Connemara I'll keep an eye on you."

"Oh now, Aunt Geraldine," said Dr. Massingham, laughing, "you're being irresponsible. Perhaps Miss—Miss ——"

"Shardiloe."

"Perhaps Miss Shardiloe's already tired of the adventure. You mustn't entice her."

"You are, of course, right," said Miss Dermot. "But I still think it's a shame, having come so far, not to get some benefit out of it. Besides, think of the anticlimax. It would be shameful."

"I rather agree with you," said Emma. "After all, I could write from Dublin, couldn't I?"

"You could," said Miss Dermot. "And there's a nice little fishing hotel not far from where I live where you'd be pretty comfortable. You could always come to tea with me when you were tired of your own company."

"Oh dear, how tempting it sounds. I should love to do that. Would the hotel be very expensive?"

"Not at all. It's very plain, you know, but tolerably clean, and the Joyces are good sort of people. You can travel with us by train as far as Galway, and then, if we're still on speaking terms, you can take a seat on the mail car. Or even if we're not; it's a public conveyance. Have you got much luggage?"

"One small portmanteau."

"Well, that could follow in the wagon with ours, or go in the boot.

It's a goodish journey, you know. We should have to break it for the night at Oughterard."

"Oh, I *should* like to," said Emma, "but won't I be terribly in the way? I mean, I should feel so dreadful if you regretted your kindness."

"If I do," said Miss Dermot, "by that time you'll certainly be regretting it as much as myself, and will go back to Dublin. I am not a tactful woman. You will easily perceive from my manner whether or not I am regretting it."

"That's true," said Dr. Massingham. "My aunt is celebrated for the candor with which she acknowledges her mistakes."

"Of course," said Miss Dermot, seeing from Emma's eager look that she had made up her mind, "you mustn't let me make up your mind for you. You must do that yourself. If I have a fault, it's impulsiveness. Don't let it influence you."

"Too late," said Emma, astonished at the mercurial rise in her own spirits, "I'm already persuaded. I shall do my best not to let you regret your extraordinary kindness."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Dermot absently, beginning to wrap up her parcels and appearing in the most disconcerting manner to forget Emma as she spoke, "yes, yes. Well. I think I shall go to bed. Carry my rug, please, Edward, and dispose of the rubbish. Nothing I hate so much as a lot of greasy paper." She heaved herself out of her chair and stood looking about her, small, compact and vital.

"Good night, young lady," she said. "I dare say I shall see you in the morning. Unless," she added, "you've already gone back to Liverpool." She gave Emma a final little nod and went off at a determined pace on her nephew's arm, Mr. Parry nimbly in attendance with bags and packages.

Emma sat still in her rugs, reviewing the situation. What an extraordinary person, she thought. Miss Geraldine Dermot of Bally-something. And Scatterry Castle! Only surely that couldn't have been the name? It was all most peculiar and enticing.

She was surprised to find that she was feeling very nearly happy. The miserable aftermath of the quarrel with her mother and Lily, the depression of the long train journey to Liverpool and the desperate resolve which had driven her on to the boat, had produced a panic-stricken inertia, heavy with self-pity. She had been amazed to find herself committed to so appalling an adventure, and had been able to keep her nervousness in check only by the decision that she would take the

next boat back from Dublin to Liverpool, and soon be home again. Now, however, by one chance encounter the adventure had changed its face, and beckoned her with an air of promise and absurdity. How infinitely preferable, having made so dramatic an exit, to give it a sequel which must surely arouse their envy! "Yes, yes," she would say, rather in Miss Dermot's tone, "I've been staying with Miss Geraldine Dermot of Scatterry Castle. Yes, a very pleasant time, thank you. The castle was most interesting. I really ought to have brought you back some photographs." Then, there was no denying she had liked the look of Dr. Massingham. Such a pleasant friendly face, such a gentlemanly air! There could be no harm in getting to know him a little better. "My friend, Dr. Massingham," she could say, "such a clever man. I met him at Scatterry Castle, you know, in Ireland." And there was also the chance that she might have something more interesting to communicate. If he were married (sobering thought) what was he doing in Ireland without Mrs. Massingham? No, no, there was no such person; the picture was complete. He must be simply Miss Dermot's nephew, agreeable and free. Her fancy skirmished inquisitively about the doctor.

Dozing and waking in her rugs, enjoying her solitude now because it was no longer absolute but a mere prelude to irresistible adventures, she was disturbed only by the fear that Miss Dermot might have changed her mind by morning. She was eccentric, perhaps, even a little mad; her more cautious nephew might have succeeded in dissuading her. After all, what could they know of her? A runaway young woman, traveling alone, what could be more disreputable? It was peculiar, to say the least, to have befriended her. "What a blessing," thought Emma, "that I had the sense to wear my best coat and skirt, and that my hat is such a good one. At least in these clothes she can't think I'm an adventuress." Such a one, she knew, would have worn sables, jewelry, scent: even Mrs. Shardiloe might have made a wrong impression.

The motion of the boat rocked her head gently from side to side, and after a time she woke up and removed her hat and went to sleep again. A gentle wind stirred her hair, and as the boat rolled a hanging lantern threw a pallid light across her and then swung creaking back, leaving her in shadow. Far down the deck other figures lay wrapped in tartan cocoons, caps pulled down and collars hunched against the mild night air; from time to time there was a whiff of somebody's

cigar. The muffled thumping of the engine, felt rather than heard, a pulse alive in every limb of the ship, insinuated itself into Emma's sleep, putting strange meanings into meaningless dreams, drawing her down to rhythmic unconsciousness in her comfortable chair. She slept until the Kingstown sea gulls came out to meet the boat, floating beside it in a luminous mist, harsh early morning voices questing and complaining.

To Emma's relief Miss Dermot was as good as her word, and as soon as she appeared from her cabin took her under her wing with as business-like an air as though it had all along been arranged that Emma should travel to Galway under her protection. Emma was pleased with her luck, for Miss Dermot seemed known to everybody, and was absorbed in the comfortable organization of her journey. She appeared to have friends everywhere, and to make the best of them. The guard on the Galway train chose a compartment for her with the fastidiousness of a connoisseur, and a jolly-looking servant in straw bonnet and cotton gloves was waiting on the platform with a luncheon basket which she modestly presented "with Mrs. Fitzpatrick's compliments." "Good, good, excellent," said Miss Dermot, and gave her a florin.

The luncheon was large and varied, and was spun out with fruit and claret to last for a full quarter of the journey. When it was over Miss Dermot had the blinds pulled down and sucked some peppermints. "I don't want," she said, catching Emma's look of wonder in the sudden gloom, "to be seen eating these." Having finished them she put up her feet and went to sleep, and the young men, not liking to talk or rustle their newspapers, did the same. Emma dozed fitfully, alternately amused and uneasy at finding herself in such odd company, and rushing in this unpremeditated way across Ireland.

It was raining when they reached Galway, a gray, blustery, unpromising afternoon. Emma was secretly shocked by the town's squalor. Beggars in shawls and rags cluttered the station steps, mud and dung were trodden all over the pavements. "Ah, Fair Day, I see," said Miss Dermot, looking pleased, "I never feel I'm home until I smell the cattle."

They went straight to a hotel which Emma, alone, would have been afraid to enter. The outside was dirty and forbidding, the bar full of tobacco smoke and crowded with drovers. "Why, it's nothing but a public house," thought Emma, dismayed; but when Miss Dermot had

picked her way confidently to a stairway at the back and ascended to the first floor the atmosphere became more domestic and reassuring. There were small dark bedrooms, cheerless but aggressively clean, with scrubbed wooden washstands, paper fans in the grates and Nottingham lace curtains festooned in dense and starchy drapery across all the windows. Emma locked her door carefully, removed her coat and blouse and washed shudderingly in cold water, an unpleasant but self-respecting operation. Then she brushed her hair and rubbed her face with a leaf of *papier poudré*, and began to feel better. Bleak though her surroundings were, it was still an astonishing experience, one that would lend itself admirably to bold retelling. Already she saw herself as the heroine of a tale which would open her mother's eyes and win a grudging interest even from Lily; she observed her own actions with detached pleasure.

They dined early in a cold and empty dining room overlooking Eyre Square, served by an elderly waiter who appeared to be one of Miss Dermot's closest friends. He hung over their consumption of strong tea and new bread and bacon and eggs with fatherly solicitude, leaning against the sideboard while they ate and darting forward with disconcerting watchfulness to fill their teacups or replenish the butter. "I hope you're enjoying this meal," said Miss Dermot, helping Emma to more bacon with an unexpected movement which defeated the waiter, "for it's the only one you'll ever get in Galway." By this she meant, as Emma soon realized, that the catering though good was capable of monotony; and certainly the supper was served again without a particle of difference for breakfast the following morning.

The mail-car which carried them as far as Oughterard was a surprise; Emma had not supposed that anything so old-fashioned and uncomfortable could still be in existence. "It's like something out of Dickens," she said to Dr. Massingham, watching apprehensively, while sacks and hampers were thrown recklessly up to the top of the heavy coach and piled between two hard narrow back-to-back benches, on which she guessed with some alarm that they would have to travel.

"Yes, but with this difference," said Dr. Massingham, "that I don't remember anyone falling off the top of one of Dickens' stage coaches, whereas I'm sure the Galway mail-car must leave the road strewn with its passengers."

"Good gracious, does it really?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. I never have an easy moment on the thing.

Aunt Geraldine has a technique of sticking on which is worth copying, but she's had far more practice than I have."

Wedged in between Miss Dermot and Mr. Parry, Emma found the motion fully as alarming as the doctor had suggested. The seats ran from front to back of the roof, the footboard was extremely narrow and there was nothing to hold on to. Miss Dermot hooked an elbow over the back, and twisted herself round to face the front, sitting upright and alert as though in a sidesaddle. There was not enough room for Emma to do this, and she clutched wildly at Miss Dermot's mantle as the four horses bounced the car over the Galway cobbles and swung round corners. Progress was easier when they reached the open road, but here they ran against a moist and purposeful wind which snatched at skirts and hats and made one's eyes water. An uncompromisingly bare and stone-walled country began to unfold, swept clean of trees and glinting with unexpected lakes, across which the wind blew with empty and maddening persistence. After a few hours of this perilous discomfort Emma was cramped and cold, and glad to accept a tartan rug for her shoulders.

Following a night spent in a small hotel which surprisingly began and ended on the first floor of the Oughterard post office, they went on in the same manner to Maam Cross, where the mail was met by Miss Dermot's own sidecar and a small cart for the luggage. They were now in the heart of a gigantic and desolate plain, rich with the olives and browns of moss and bog, circled by distant mountains and an empty horizon. The wind still blew erratically, but the day was sunny, and dazzling ranges of clouds piled up from the back of the hills and sailed their gigantic shadows over the heather. Emma stood at the windy crossroads holding her hat, and looked about her. It was an intimidating landscape, empty and untamable and of immense dignity; she was surprised to see any sign of human habitation in this unmanageable waste. Yet cabins there undoubtedly were, tiny cubes of whitewash, brilliant as the clouds themselves, scattered remotely on far-off rises of ground, each with its patch of startling green where a scrap of pasture had been coaxed out of the barrenness of the bog. Did people really live out their lives there, Emma wondered, so far apart, so unsheltered, with not even a road or path to link them together? She supposed they did, but found it difficult to imagine. Perhaps these raffish barefoot children, watching the loading of the side-

car with grinning interest, lived in such places; certainly they were as thin and wary as wild animals.

"Come along now," called Miss Dermot, "we shall leave you behind." She climbed into the sidecar with the light-boned agility of a monkey, and Emma followed gingerly, a little embarrassed by the high step from the ground. What extraordinary conveyances they favored in Ireland, real triumphs in their way of perverse art, aimed at extracting the last ounce of discomfort out of four wheels and coachmakers' upholstery. The seats of Miss Dermot's sidecar were at least padded, but they still ran back to back and in the wrong direction. One could bear driving sideways if only the seats faced each other, thought Emma. There was nothing for it but to take up the sidesaddle attitude, holding the rug with one hand and one's hat with the other, praying against cramp. "Bwace your weight against the footboard," advised Mr. Parry.

The groom chirruped affectionately to the pony and the sidecar moved off down an arm of the crossroads at right angles to the one on which the mail had disappeared a quarter of an hour before. Miss Dermot and her nephew were perched on one seat, Emma and Mr. Parry at their backs. The only person with any chance of comfort was the groom, who sat enviably above, facing the same way as the pony. Emma found that the rough road reeled out in sickening lines from under her feet if she looked down. Afraid of becoming giddy she kept her eyes on the mountains, and with half her attention listened to the totally incomprehensible conversation which the groom was carrying on over his shoulder with Miss Dermot.

The strangeness of his speech, the strangeness of the country and indeed of everything about her, made Emma feel very foreign and bewildered. How had she had the temerity to suppose that she would ever be able to penetrate this country alone? Ignorant, friendless, with little money (she still had the best part of twenty pounds in her purse, five pounds of her own and fifteen which she had borrowed from her father's cashbox in the moment of leaving), how in the world had she imagined that she would even find her way? She would, she supposed, have stayed timidly in Dublin, not daring to do anything more than visit the museums and picture galleries, forlornly waiting until dignity should allow her to go home. Whereas now, safe in the comforting aura of Miss Dermot's authority and in the prized company of two increasingly agreeable young men, she was going farther and seeing a

wilder country than she had ever dreamed of. Emma had seen little even of the English countryside; her mother's taste had leaned toward the seaside for holidays, and Emma's experience of the sea had been urban enough, bounded by cast-iron bandstands and asphalt promenades and consisting in childhood of playing in button boots on crowded sands and walking along railed esplanades between bathing machines and boarding houses. Now, as the pony placidly trotted between lake and bog and the mountains began to circle about them, shifting their positions, a strong yet far-off seaweedy smell stirred Emma's youthful memories, and she looked ahead expectantly for the first signs of a town.

"Are we near the sea?" she asked Miss Dermot at last, having seen nothing to justify the elusive seabeach smell, but only rock and heather and bog and the gently waltzing, mysteriously shifting hills.

"We are," said Miss Dermot, "you'll see it presently, when we go over that next brow." And sure enough, when the dappled pony had walked up the long stony ascent and reached level ground again, the sea was spread below them on the left—a smooth, surprising sea, purple and green, scattered with low lying dark and barren islands, no road along its shore, no town, no houses even, and not so much as a sail to be seen on the whole shining and unconfined horizon.

Joyce's Hotel, at which Emma was set down with her portmanteau toward the end of the afternoon, was modest and untidy, with an air of well-worn comfort and an inhabited smell. There was a small fire smoking peacefully in the parlor, and the aroma of smoldering turf haunted the rooms. A rack holding fishing rods ran the length of the flagged hall, and boots, landing nets and a weighing machine cluttered the doorway. There were many little dark pictures in tarnished frames and mysterious glass cases of stuffed fish crowded between them; Emma studied the trout with interest while she waited for Mrs. Joyce to emerge from the back premises. Miss Dermot had walked in briskly and caught an untidy servant at the foot of the stairs.

"Now, Bridget or whatever your name is, has Mrs. Joyce got a nice room for this young lady?" The girl came down a step or two, looking defensive.

"I don't know, ma'am."

"Well, go and find out. She's got a room somewhere, I suppose?"

"She have, ma'am."

"Well hurry up, then. Tell her Miss Dermot wants her."

"I will, ma'am."

The girl sidled mistrustfully past Emma and disappeared in the kitchen.

"There now," said Miss Dermot, "you'll soon be made comfortable. I'll see she doesn't charge you too much, either. There's practically nobody but a few fishermen in the place."

Mrs. Joyce appeared, a small thin gap-toothed woman in distorting spectacles behind which her eyes swam large and gray, like oysters; she shook hands with both of them. She was obviously flattered by Miss Dermot's presence, and anxious to make a good impression on Emma.

"You're welcome, ma'am," she said; "we'll be doing our best to make you comfortable. We've nobody here at all at present but only two Dublin fishing gentlemen and Father Ryan from Tuam over the parlor."

"Good, good, excellent," said Miss Dermot. "You do your very best now, Mrs. Joyce, for Miss Shardiloe, and I'll be coming over in a day or two to visit her." She turned to Emma with a curious little smile, screwing up her eyes. "Now, you settle down, young lady, and write a proper letter to your parents, and get a little color into your cheeks before you go home again."

"Oh, I will," said Emma, following her out into the road, "and thank you, a thousand times."

"For nothing," said Miss Dermot, ignoring her nephew's hand as she clambered up into her seat. She waved dismissingly and the young men raised their tweed caps with a benevolent gesture.

"A beautiful day, thank God," cried Mrs. Joyce in parting.

Emma went up to her room and unpacked her bag in a state of bemused contentment, stopping from time to time to stare through the window. Below her a hedge of fuchsia, profuse and wild, had scattered a film of crimson over the road, and the bog stretched beyond in rich and uneven emptiness to the foot of the mountains. Like shabby plush, thought Emma, admiring the way in which the mist-diffused sunshine picked out first one fold and then another of its olive greens and browns, the subtle gray lacing of skeleton rock, the dotted turf stacks as glutinously dark and brown as plug tobacco. The hills shifted and changed their shapes in a veil of rain, but on the bog fitful shafts of sunshine pierced and dissolved, so that one almost saw the velvety

landscape steaming. It was an empty landscape until one stared at it, and then it revealed minute and scattered life. A boy on a donkey, both brown and gray as the enveloping bog about them, moved microscopically among the turf stacks, appearing and disappearing; the smaller stacks stirred from time to time and were grazing cattle: and the road, the long gray narrow road that ran off into God knows where in that fabulous wilderness, was peopled with the slow mysterious comings and goings that one sees in the tiny perspectives of medieval paintings. A shawled woman, perched blackly on the high rump of a gray donkey, drew gradually nearer; a man moved with unimaginable slowness in the distance, followed by a white speck which crossed and recrossed the road, distantly barking; and a moving dot resolved itself into a high trap in which a nun was sitting, her veil spreading like a black wing behind the driver. All these things were dwarfed by space and became apparent only when the eye rested thoughtfully on that monotonous yet subtly varied plain, detecting their minute progress as one might that of insects among the grass, as unnoticeably part of the landscape as the passage of birds.

When she had finished her unpacking Emma sat down by the open window and gazed for a long time without stirring. A sense of emptiness and peace began to invade her, as though the febrile disturbances of the past were being drained away, and she had arrived at some new and innocent beginning where experience was forgotten. It was the same feeling she had known as a child, when she had left Miss Swanton's under the shadow of old disgraces and gone to another school: there was the same freshness and relief of spirit, the same confidence in her power to be different among strangers, to slough off the old skin of humiliations and disappointments and emerge glistening in new colors, untried, unknown, capable of anything. From the horror of that last evening at the Websters', from the uneasy shame of suspicions and accusations, from Dawes even, and the memory of his devious subterfuges, she turned away with flinching and distaste. The whole episode was colored by humiliation, and her memory burned under its bitter flavor. She glanced at it sideways, already contriving to forget the uglier aspects, ignoring her own identity with its central figure. In her place rose a creature altogether different, preferred and blameless, the person she now was, or at least would be; the mysterious and appealing figure of a woman alone, appearing in a strange country, a target for romantic fancy and speculation.

The following morning, clothed in her new character, Emma went out alone to examine and explore. Her solitude had lost none of its exaltation; she had observed and dismissed the fishing gentlemen at breakfast, and since she had seen nobody else in the place but the dirty servant, went out with the rapt self-absorption of a votary whose silence is still unbroken. It was gray soft promising weather, pregnant with showers; the grass at the roadside pressed buoyantly under her foot and the stems of the mosses glistened with tiny moisture. She left the road and dragged her skirts over the heather and short flowering grasses; then became wary, feeling the brilliant and treacherous softness of moss as she walked, sinking down in its cushiony depths to mud and water. Evidently the bog was a difficult place to walk, but it was no less enchanting. She proceeded carefully, choosing veinings of rock to walk on and heathery stretches, avoiding the tempting brilliance of green and copper.

All about her was a small and bewildering embroidery of growth, unseen at first, too complicated for the eye. Lichens as yellow as gold and green as cheese skinned over the rocks, putting forth scales and fur and tiny corallike branches; the mosses were a quaking forest of flowers and pods. Even the grasses, feathery and small and foreign, seemed never to repeat themselves; they sprang up lithely again from one's heels in strange vigor and profusion.

After a time Emma came on a rough path of bedded stones and followed it slowly, carrying her hat in her hand. The sun was struggling to dissolve the overhead grayness, and she became aware of its mild invisible benevolence, diffused and warm. She picked her way along the wandering path, looking ahead to see where it would lead her. There was no cabin in sight, nothing but the path itself dwindling and disappearing and occasionally dipping abruptly into brackish water, but the neat dark kidney-shaped droppings of donkeys lay all along the way, suggesting some kind of traffic and a destination. It led, however, nowhere, or at least to no end for which she could imagine a reason, for after about a mile it became nothing but a track and then vanished altogether, running out like a spun thread among the peat stacks. Emma sat down on a rock and looked about her. On one side of the path the ground had been cut sharply away as if by a knife; the treacly smoothness of the cut surface ran down like a black wall into blacker water, and the sods of peat, as neatly scooped as though they had been dug with a spoon, were carefully ranged along the

brink to dry. From behind them a grazing sheep regarded her blankly with yellow eyes, and then, taking fright at some slight movement, made off convulsively across the heather, kicking up its heels in goat-like leaps and tossing a shabby tail.

"Silly thing," said Emma aloud, "I shouldn't hurt you." She felt calm and happy and curiously free, content for the present to do nothing at all, yet conscious at the back of her mind of a certain expectancy. Home seemed so far away that it no longer existed; in this open, empty yet minutely teeming landscape the devious scheming of her past life became shabby and unreal. It belonged to another person, somebody drab and forgotten, not to the romantic and solitary figure sitting at the end of the road, watching the little brown moths hovering about her skirts and lighting on the ribbons of her hat where she had dropped it in the grass.

The next two days Emma passed alone in the same fashion, pleasantly enough, but with a rising anxiety. Ought she, perhaps, to call on Miss Dermot at the castle? Or would it be better to wait until she was invited? On the other hand it was quite possible that Miss Dermot had forgotten her altogether. Two whole days had passed without a summons or even a message. It was very puzzling. She wandered more cautiously now, nearer to the hotel, studying the whole length of the road as she returned and going straight to the hall table each time to look for a letter. The table was always littered with the muddles of the fishing gentlemen, mackintoshes and landing nets and little japanned fly-books indistinguishable from children's paintboxes. Emma patiently moved these every day, feeling beneath them with her hand; but there was never anything.

"How far is it, by the way, to Scattery Castle?" she asked Mrs. Joyce on the third evening, when disappointment had taken all the pride out of her adventure, leaving it foolish and deflated.

"Why, have you not been there already? I'm thinking Miss Dermot will be sending the trap over for you any day now. She'd never see you walk."

"Well," said Emma, "I thought perhaps it might be nice to walk over if it wasn't very far."

"Ah, 'tis too much of a tramp for a young lady," said Mrs. Joyce, looking shocked, "never you try it, ma'am. 'Tis five or six miles for sure, maybe seven. There's a shorter way over the bog, now, but you'd

never find yourself. Never you stir, ma'am. Miss Dermot will be sending the trap over any minute."

With this optimistic prophecy Emma had to content herself, for she could get no explicit directions out of Mrs. Joyce, and was herself doubtful of the propriety of arriving at the castle uninvited. Nor was Mrs. Joyce any more helpful in her descriptions. "Ah, 'tis a beautiful place, a fine place," she said many times when asked; "Miss Dermot have everything of the grandest"; but she gave no clue to the social behavior that Miss Dermot might expect. Emma spent her afternoons in irresolute watchfulness, never straying far from the little hotel, sending more and more cautiously worded picture postcards to her mother, and fearing herself forgotten. On the fourth morning of her solitude, however, she came back from her customary walk on the bog to find a smart high trap standing idly at the door of the hotel and Miss Dermot's dappled pony cropping the fuchsias.

"It's yourself at last, now," said Mrs. Joyce, popping anxiously out of the dining room as soon as she heard Emma's foot in the hall. "Miss Dermot's boy have been here since half-eleven, and I didn't know which way to look for you at all. You'll maybe be staying away the night?" She put her head on one side and crossed her hands on her stomach.

"Oh no, I shouldn't think so," said Emma, startled.

"Well, that may be the idee," said Mrs. Joyce, "I can't say for certain. Miss Dermot's boy said you was to stay the night if you pleased, but you'd be away anyways for both dinner and tea. He's out at back now, netting up a small calf you're to take wid you under the seat."

Emma flew upstairs to make herself ready, and threw hurried glances out of the window as she buttoned the collar of her fresh muslin blouse and pinned on her hat. The calf, a very small black one, was bleating powerfully from under the seat of the trap, and the groom was filling the rest of the floor space with parcels. Emma took a careful last look at herself in the dark mirror and ran downstairs.

The man touched his cap and made a little speech in which she could interpret only the words: "Miss Dermot's compliments." She smiled and nodded, letting him hand her up on to the high padded seat, above the level of the fuchsia hedge and the ground-floor windows where the hotel servants stood furtively half-concealed behind the curtains. With a little deprecating smile, as if apologizing for his proxim-

ity, the man swung himself into the seat beside her, and with endearing words drew the pony's head backward out of the fuchsia.

The trap moved off with a slow but disconcerting gait, rolling buoyantly enough behind the pony's rump when the road was level, but lurching disproportionately at every stone and slowing down to a walking pace wherever the ground showed the least inclination to rise. The pony walked far more than he trotted, and this in a way was a relief, for his trotting threw Emma so violently from side to side that she had to hold on firmly to the edge of the seat, nervously conscious of the netted calf and the parcels jolting uncomfortably closer to the backs of her legs. His walk was a sedate and soothing motion, so slow that she had time to observe every foxglove and every stone at the side of the road as they approached and passed it, every faded feathery head of meadowsweet in the ditches, each smear of moss and curious blossoming of lichen on the ragged walls.

"I hope you have good brakes," she said after a time, when at the end of a long and gradual ascent the road took a sudden downward plunge in sight of the sea and the pony walked even more reluctantly than before, heaving up his haunches against the front of the trap, which scrubbed up and down with a harsh scratching noise against his tail.

"Indeed we have not, ma'am," the groom said cheerfully, "the pony brakes her."

"Oh," said Emma, looking down at the falling road and the sea below it, and hoping that the weight of the pony was greater than that of the trap. "Oh, I see. I'm glad he doesn't want to hurry down this hill."

"He's too cliver for that, ma'am. He knows if he was t'increase he'd be down on the broad of his back be the next turning. Besides, he have a disgust of the thrap, ma'am. He'll niver go fast without a bating once he feels the shafts on him."

"I think he shows great sense," said Emma, relaxing her hold a little. Her knuckles were stiff from gripping the edge of the seat. "How long will it take him at this pace to get to the castle?"

"Oh, not above an hour, ma'am. We should be there be half-twelve, I'd say; that's to reckon, as fast as a man could walk."

Certainly the pony walked little faster than Emma herself would have done, but the distance proved to be a matter of only four and a half miles, and long before Emma had begun to watch for her first

sight of the castle they had turned off the road between two rough stone gateposts and were proceeding leisurely up the avenue. She knew it was the avenue because that was how the groom described it, waving his whip with an expansive gesture which made her flinch; but it appeared to be nothing more than a broad grassy track sweeping in generous convolutions round the base of a slight hill, on the further slopes of which was the first mass of full-grown trees which Emma had seen since she came into Connemara. They were all bent at the same angle as the hill, and solidly packed together in their foliage like sheared fleece; as the trap bumped over the green ruts of the avenue there emerged from the midst of them the surprising gray grotesque of Scattery Castle.

It was too small for Emma's idea of a castle, and ordinary chimneys sprouted in plebeian groups among the slopes of the roof. One would call it, rather, a big ungainly house; but at that point, the trap bumping a little nearer, one saw the mullioned Gothic windows, the undecided bow front of a sham tower, and a curiously halfhearted outcropping of irregular battlements. The place had a bleak untenanted air, as though there were no curtains in the windows and nobody really lived there any more. There was no sign of a garden, only the fleece of shorn trees blown closely against the house, and, at one corner, a higgledy-piggledy arrangement of cabins and sheds which might have been a farm. Yet the site cried aloud for a castle, and it was easy to believe that something had once crowned the slope more fitting to the scene than this formless jumble of nineteenth-century pastiche; something which could look down to the sea on one side and to the mountains on the other without embarrassment.

The avenue continued to circle respectfully about it, and at last ran up through a tunnel of trees and brought the trap out on a patch of weedy gravel in front of the house. The door, which would have done very well for a small church, was open, and a cushion, a teacup and some sketching materials were scattered on the steps. There was nobody about. Emma got down from the creaking trap and looked in, hesitating. The hall was paved with marble and very empty, with an indifferent untidy emptiness which somehow was not forbidding: somebody had thrown down an old panama hat on the only table and a pair of fishing-boots under it.

"They'll be down at the fishing, the way the breeze is," said the groom, following her in. He pushed open a door at the side of the

hall and call "Michael!" Presently a very old man, the ruins of a handsome face and lively figure, came cautiously through the doorway, bearing a tray. He was dressed in nondescript clothing and his hands were dirty, but there was a reassuring benevolence about all his actions, as of one who is pleasantly conscious of doing the honors. He set down a decanter and a glass beside the panama hat.

"Miss Dermot herself is taking a cast with the gentlemen," he announced; "she said for you to take a glass of wine, ma'am, if you please, and follow down to them."

"Oh, thank you," said Emma, "I will." There was nowhere to sit, so she sipped her wine where she was, standing at the table. The old man withdrew a few paces and delicately turned his gaze to the open door. When she had finished he accompanied her to the doorstep and pointed out a path through the trees by which she would come to the river. Emma set off slowly, feeling at once curious and shy, suddenly reluctant to arrive at the moment of meeting. She walked slowly until the path ran out of the trees and she found herself at the top of a sloping pasture which ran gently down to a small river and a stone bridge. Beyond the bridge the river broke up into a fine delta of tiny streams, running lacily among reeds and flags until it reached a curving stretch of smooth sand and carved a variable tidal course to the sea. On the near side of the bridge three figures were fishing earnestly from the bank, their lines flashing like signals as they cast between sun and water. Emma stood still on the sun-warmed turf to watch them, and in the same instant Miss Dermot looked up and waved. Her voice floated up from the river, remote and clear and curiously youthful, a welcoming yet imperious voice. Emma lightly clasped her hands behind her and sauntered down the turfy slope to the river.

"The thing I don't understand," said Miss Dermot at lunch, "is how you ever had the courage to come all this way alone."

"Do you mean from the hotel?" said Emma, wondering to what surprising standard of female timidity Miss Dermot would now lay claim.

"No, no. I mean all the way from London. Extraordinary thing for a young woman of your age to have done."

"You seem to forget that you were chiefly responsible for it," said Dr. Massingham, giving Emma a comfortable look from behind his

spectacles; "Miss Shardiloe would be back in the bosom of her family by now if it weren't for you, Aunt Geraldine."

"So she would," said Miss Dermot, intent on her food; "I was forgetting that. I hope, at least, she doesn't regret her rash action."

"I hope not, too," said Dr. Massingham. "We haven't behaved very well, though, have we? Persuading her to come all the way to Ballyknock and then leaving her all alone for three days."

"You must blame the twout," said Mr. Parry.

"He means the fishing," said Dr. Massingham, catching Emma's puzzled look. "He can't say his R's, you know; it leads to all sorts of misunderstandings. We once had a landlady called Mrs. Madden when we were in lodgings together, and one day she fell from top to bottom of the stairs. 'Oh, Mrs. Madden, are you bwuised?' said Eric, rushing out of his room and finding her lying on the mat. 'Sir,' said Mrs. Madden, regarding him indignantly from where she lay, 'you know very well I never touch a drop.'"

Emma laughed, glancing across as she did so at Mr. Parry, who had been waiting for the end of the story with a defensive grin. She was amazed to find herself so much at home with these people, as though she had known them all from childhood and had never for a moment expected the castle to be grand or its way of life beyond her.

"Not fair," said Mr. Parry, "not fair. I won't be made a figure of fun to Miss Shardiloe."

"You can't avoid it, you know," said Dr. Massingham kindly. "You're the kind of man around whom foolish anecdotes spring up like mushrooms. You must accept your character."

"Oh, by all means," said Mr. Parry, "but not the one that you bestow on me. Your idea of the man Pawwy isn't mine."

"No, of course," said Dr. Massingham, pausing in the act of raising his glass as if to give his aspect of the matter his considered attention.

"And how annoying it is, how vulgar, to be labeled by somebody else. Yet flattering, too, in a way. It means at least you'll be remembered." He turned to Emma. "We labeled you, you see, the Mysterious Young Lady, because we knew nothing about you, and could only guess. But now, the better we know you, the less mysterious you'll appear, and the label becomes absurd as well as impertinent."

"Not a bit of it," said Miss Dermot suddenly from the top of the table. "Miss Shardiloe will always remain mysterious. I can see that's her line." Emma looked up sharply.

"What can you mean by that, I wonder?"

"Why, simply your looks, my dear. With those eyes, that face, that deliberate way of moving, you've *got* to live up to being a mysterious character, or else the whole thing's a waste. Don't tell me you're really a New Woman, interested in golf and politics."

"No, no, not that," said Emma, smiling her relief. She had thought for a moment that Miss Dermot had found out all about her, that the new blameless character in which she had clothed herself was to be blown upon and suspected.

"Well, take my advice and go on being mysterious," said Miss Dermot. "Like your hat, it's highly becoming."

Dr. Massingham frowned.

"I don't see why women should wish to be mysterious," he said. "I can't believe they do. It's a mischievous legend which they haven't quite managed to live down."

"My good Edward, you only say that because you're a feminist, which is only another way of saying that you're a fool. The women who go to your Fabian Society teas are no more mysterious than my boot, I dare say, but the *best* women are always mysterious." She glanced at him and rubbed a spot off the front of her bodice with a napkin. "I am mysterious, for instance," said Miss Dermot.

"So you are, Aunt Geraldine, if you say so; and so are all your ways. I give it up."

"Quite right. That's what you're meant to do. And now, if you've all finished your pudding, perhaps you'll show Miss Shardiloe the house while I go and lie down. I can hardly keep my eyes open." She pushed back her chair and stood up, her eyes watering with the effort of smothering a yawn. "You mustn't think me rude, Miss Shardiloe. I'm a creature of habit, that's all. And if you've made a habit of going to sleep after lunch every day for forty years five minutes' frustration is nothing short of torture."

"I know," said Emma. "My mother always does it. She says it's the golden rule for preserving youth."

"Rubbish," said Miss Dermot, "it's nothing but laziness. How pleasant, though," she added, "how wonderfully, irresistibly pleasant." She trailed off, dragging her shawl behind her, Mr. Parry making polite ineffectual rushes to retrieve it.

Dr. Massingham looked inquiringly at Emma for a moment and smiled. It was a friendly, ordinary smile, one without guile or social

obligations anywhere about it, the smile of a naturally amiable man who enjoys himself easily. Emma experienced a little pang of pleasure as she looked at him.

"Where shall we begin?" he said. "It's such a peculiar house, I can never make up my mind as to the best order of showing it."

"Why not begin here? Guides always show the public rooms first, don't they, and then work up gradually to the bloodstains and secret passages?"

"So they do. Well, this, as you see, is the dining room. Gothic windows, no curtains, cold stone floor and very little furniture. Some of the silver, however, is quite good. Aunt Geraldine's lost most of it."

"It's a very large room," said Emma, "and what a high ceiling. Isn't it very difficult to keep warm in winter?"

"It would be, of course, but they don't try."

"Oh, I see. You eat somewhere else in cold weather."

"Not at all. We eat here. All I meant was that Aunt Geraldine, being a realist, makes no attempt to warm it. It wouldn't be any use."

"Oh." Emma looked down at the chilly flagstones doubtfully.

"You've seen the hall already," he went on, opening the door and following her through. "Look now, this is the drawing room. This still has the old brocade curtains, you see; the sun hasn't rotted them so badly on this side. They look quite beautiful, I think, but in a round room like this, with these long pointed windows, the barer it is the better, really. I like it more now than when it had more furniture in it. When I was a boy Aunt Geraldine used to give evening parties sometimes, and all the candles would be lit and all the mirrors full of a deep reflected light; and the windows would be open if it was summer, and while Aunt Geraldine was singing at the piano the rooks would suddenly come home—thousands and thousands of them, blowing across the sky like handfuls of tinder, and almost drowning her voice. These are the only trees for miles, you know; it's been a rookery for centuries."

"It must have been lovely," said Emma, lingering and yearning over the forsaken room. "Was Miss Dermot very beautiful in those days?"

"Oh no. Not as most people understand beauty. She was always small, you know, with none of the advantages of height and grace, like yours. But she had a neatness, a vitality, that were tremendously attractive. I've seen an early portrait of her, in a crinoline with bare

shoulders, which was quite irresistible. I believe lots of people were in love with her."

"How curious it is, then," said Emma, "that she never married."

"Oh, but she did. She married a rather rich baronet when she was quite young, and went to live in England. I don't think she liked it very much. She'll never talk about it. After a few years, most fortunately, the husband died, and she came back at once to Ireland and dropped her married name, and went back to being Miss Dermot of Ballyknock."

"Fancy that," said Emma, astounded. "Did she have any children?"

"No. That's why she's always been so kind to me, I think. My father was her cousin and my mother was her youngest sister."

They progressed slowly through the downstairs rooms, most of which, it seemed, were rarely opened; unlatching shutters to let in a strong sea-reflected light on wallpapers and furniture which were no longer used to it. In many of the rooms the furniture had an air of not belonging: it was too sparse, and the carpets were too small, as though the house were in the last, the unpretending stage of reduced circumstances, and soon with a sigh of relief would fall empty altogether. Some of the bedrooms, however, still had the relics of a romantic beauty. The best were those above the drawing room, forming the sham tower: these were completely circular, with an array of slender Gothic windows taking in the whole sweep of green and purple sea, the low rocks, the islands, the curve of shallow beach and the salty, sheep-cropped turf which ran up to the trees.

"When I was a boy," said Dr. Massingham, "I always used to think of these windows as being the ones in the poem. You know, 'magic casements opening on the foam . . .' You can't believe how magic those windows are, when you come into the dark room at night with your candle, and open the shutters, and there's the whole sea and sky before you, vast and luminous as they always are here in summer, even at midnight. I used to crouch staring on the window sill for hours."

"What a wonderful place to spend a childhood in," said Emma, thinking with ancient distaste of the Brixton Hill kitchen, and her stuffy bedroom, and the sooty laurels. "Didn't you want to spend the rest of your life here as well?"

"Good lord, yes. In a place I love as much as this, the temptation to idleness is irresistible. The trouble with my life is that there are always

too many things that I want to devote it to. Ease and idleness at Scattery are only one of them."

"What are the others, I wonder?" said Emma, sitting down on the broad window sill and looking up at him. She would have liked hearing the whole story of his life from earliest infancy, if there had been time to listen and he had been disposed to tell it; but at least it was better than nothing to skim the surface.

"Oh," he said, "so many. I'm a very diffused character, I'm afraid. Jack of all trades and master of none, as one used to be called."

"But your real trade, as you call it, is being a doctor, isn't it?"

"Oh, very much so. I ought to stick to it." Again there was that ready, affectionate and somehow innocent smile. "I shall, of course. Only, to adopt medicine as one's lifework means shutting one's eyes to so many possibilities which may, after all, be the important ones."

"Being a doctor is very important."

"I know it. I wish I were going to be a better one. I used to have dreams of being a great specialist, like we all do, but of course what I've done in the end is to qualify as an ordinary G.P. and buy a suburban practice. I suppose in time one gets used to the idea of humdrum obscurity, but there are still moments when I find it difficult to swallow. Then I want to throw it all over and reform the world, and die a blazing martyr in the cause of something or other."

"That doesn't sound very comfortable," said Emma.

"No, it doesn't, does it? That's the objection. Even the first preliminary stages of martyrdom are uncomfortable. And then a beautiful, releasing sense of futility and helplessness sweeps over one, and one hurries to the west of Ireland and Aunt Geraldine, determined to wring the last drop of idle pleasure out of existence before it's too late."

Emma laughed.

"That sounds the nicest of all," she said.

"It's the most insidious and the most seducing," he said. "There's nothing wrong with life at Ballyknock. It's empty and rich at the same time, and there's an ageless quality about it because there's so little change. This country's always been beautiful since the beginning of the world, and I don't think it's changed at all since the Middle Ages. Have you noticed yet the extraordinary absence of ugliness? First of all, on the surface, there's beauty everywhere—mountains and bog and sea and these gigantic skies, and the people going about

in their beauty and ragged dignity like something out of *Piers Plowman*; and then you learn to see below the surface, and for a time you think everything is going to be spoiled. There's poverty, and squalor, and disease, and meanness, and the Church everywhere chewing away at the country like a great maggot—" He broke off and looked at Emma in sudden dismay. "I say, I'm extremely sorry, are you a Catholic?"

"No, I'm not. I'm not anything. Do go on."

"Well," he said, drawing breath, "what a relief. I'm always finding these things out too late. Where was I?"

"Chewing away at the country like a great maggot."

"So I was. Well. As I was saying, I don't like the Church. At least, I don't like it when I first get below the attractive surface, and find what appears to be a mass of political power clothed in superstition, bleeding the people; and I find that the people are liars and treacherous, even to each other, in spite of their beautiful dignity and their natural manners, and the poetry in them that makes old Michael in the kitchen there talk like the Ancient of Days. And I get worried about them being so poor, and so dirty and so helpless, and about life being so barren for them, as barren as those rocks which they cover with seaweed and soil with their own hand." He sat down on the window sill beside her and leaned back against the shutter, his spectacles glinting at her in friendly fashion.

"And then, you know, you go a bit deeper still, and you get down to an idiotic, unprogressive, instinctive feeling about it all, which the reforming half of one's nature says is quite damnable, but which some much more deep-seated part of one says is right. One sees the essential rightness, the *integrity*, of all those things that formerly had appeared ugly. Dirt, poverty and the hard life become poetic and inescapable on this particular soil, and disease, since they live to fabulous ages and bury their dead without regret in those pagan-looking little cemeteries down by the sea, a thing of no account. Even the Church reappears in its first guise, as a comforter, a vein of romantic fantasy running through life, creating magical possibilities everywhere, an imaginative flowering of the utmost richness."

"Oh surely," said Emma, "that's the best way to look at it. I mean, if a thing comforts people at all, it must be worth having?"

"No," said Dr. Massingham, suddenly frowning in a puzzled way and looking out of the window, "no, you're wrong; and I'm wrong,

too, when I get down to that unquestioning, instinctive level. The artist's eye has great value, but it's lazy and sentimental to apply it to everything. My aesthetic sense tells me that this country and this people are all of a piece, beautiful, savage, mean and ancient, and that there's not an overstatement or a false stroke anywhere. But my common sense tells me that politically, medically, agriculturally, even humanly the whole thing is a failure and a mess."

He looked at Emma with a sort of doubtful amusement.

"This is a fine way to show anybody the house," he said.

"It's the best possible way," said Emma. "I couldn't be enjoying myself more."

"What beautiful manners you have. They put me to shame. Come on, I haven't shown you the banqueting hall, and it's the *pièce de résistance*."

They got up and walked in companionable silence through several long uncarpeted passages and down a flight of stone stairs.

"Oh, this is rather a surprising room," he said suddenly, pausing on a narrow landing and unlocking a door. He caught Emma's arm as she moved past him to go in. "Careful," he said, and kept his hand on her wrist.

Emma hesitated, and saw with a thrill of shock that there was no room there, just a square chasm of stone walls with a blackened fireplace at the level where the floor had once been. The fireplace was full of twigs and dust, the debris of starlings.

"It fell in, long ago," he said, "and has never been restored. The door's kept locked for safety, but the key is always kept in the lock for convenience, a thoroughly Irish arrangement."

"Sensible, too," said Emma, "because otherwise you wouldn't have been able to surprise me."

He laughed, and went on before her down the narrow stairs. At the bottom they came into a broad flagged passage, ending in a door. "This is surprising, too, in its way," he said, and opened the door on to a slender gallery. "This, I positively assure you, is the banqueting hall."

Emma followed him on to the gallery and looked down into a cold dark empty shell of building not unlike a dungeon, smelling of plaster and damp.

"You see," he said, leaning his elbows on the balustrade and looking down, "it was meant to be very grandiose, but it was never finished.

Aunt Geraldine's father built it, somewhere in the forties, but he never had the money to finish it. He didn't even, as you see, get as far as the windows. When this door behind us is shut there's no light at all. It looks very eerie even in daytime if you come in with a candle."

"I should think so," said Emma, peering down; "how horrible it would be to get shut in."

"Very nasty. I think, though, one might be able to make somebody hear by knocking on the wall. They're not as thick as they look, especially just underneath us, where there was going to be a door. The kitchen's just on the other side of that. It was going to be a service door, you see. The company, on the other hand, would come in by way of the gallery, and make a stately descent down the staircase which was never built."

Emma leaned cautiously over the balustrade, inhaling the sepulchral air.

"Is it haunted?"

"I'm afraid not. An awful waste, isn't it? It would be, of course, if it belonged to anybody but Aunt Geraldine. She says the competition's too severe in this neighborhood, and in any case she can't be bothered."

"What do you mean, 'competition'?"

"Oh, every house round here has its ghost, some have two or three. Aunt Geraldine takes the view that ghosts are vulgar. And then you see there's Maam Abbey only a few miles away which has pretty well cornered the market."

"Are there a lot there?"

"Oh, good lord, yes. Dozens. They've about doubled their numbers, too, since the present owner's time. Have you come across Colonel Swann? An engaging lunatic."

"No. Tell me about him."

"Well, he has a great many bees in his bonnet, and the principal one—I should say the queen bee—has to do with Darwin's theory of evolution. The other, which is rather less spectacular, is ghosts. He only bought the place about twenty years ago, and it was pretty much of a ruin and not very interesting, but he renovated it and furnished it and clothed it in ghost stories, and now a lot of people are quite genuinely afraid to go past it at night. I must say," he said, shifting his position on the balustrade to one of greater comfort, "that he's somehow manufactured a very frightening atmosphere. My sister

and I used to go there to tea sometimes when we were children, and we used to be really terrified by his hints and warnings. He doesn't seem at all alarming now, because of recent years the queen bee has overshadowed all the others, and has made his behavior so absolutely astonishing that one's amazement gets quite exhausted, and one can't bother about the hauntings."

"Why, what does he do?"

"Well, you see, after years of religious resistance he got converted to Darwin. I don't know how he managed it, for he'd always belonged to the school that maintains that when God created the world He put fossils in the rocks as a sort of booby trap, to test our faith. Well, then, as I said, he got converted, and his conviction of man's descent from monkeys became so strong that it got to be a sort of religion with him, and he came to believe that all the ill-health in the world was due to the unnatural development of the upright stance. The human stomach, he maintained, was meant to go on all fours, and it was this perverse up-ending of the thing, contrary to the ways of nature, which was responsible for all indigestion and internal disorders. With a man of Colonel Swann's mettle to think is to act, and he began going on all fours when he was quite alone, just to correct the balance. This practical test apparently gave beneficial results, and eventually he gave up walking upright altogether, and used to make his wretched wife and daughters go on all fours for several hours a day and even tried to impose this rule on his servants, at moments when they weren't carrying trays or anything of that kind. It was very disconcerting, I can tell you. Nobody liked it, least of all the neighbors. After a bit even his relations stopped visiting the abbey."

"I don't wonder," said Emma, looking shocked. "What happened then?"

"In the end both his daughters ran away and married soldiers—the most upright men they could find, I fancy. And Mrs. Swann very cleverly had a stroke which paralyzed her left side, so that now she spends her life in bed and hardly ever sees him."

"What a resourceful woman," said Emma, beginning to laugh. "Is all this really true?"

"Absolutely. They're both still there. She's bedridden, of course, and the colonel hasn't walked upright for years. He has a special kind of leather gloves made for his hands. If I could think of a good enough excuse I'd take you to see them."

"Oh, I wish you could," said Emma. "I'm afraid I shall have to go back to London in a few days, though." She stared down into the dark well below them, thrusting the forlorn thought to the back of her mind. Somewhere in the heart of the house a bell tolled.

"That's tea," said Dr. Massingham. "It also means that Aunt Geraldine's refreshed and awake and doesn't like being kept waiting. I expect she wonders what on earth I've done with you."

They closed the door of the gallery behind them and walked back to the inhabited part of the house, where Miss Dermot, startlingly bright and alert in a purple dress, was sitting at the head of the dining table behind a silver kettle, brilliant center of a bare room full of air and sunlight.

After tea, when the young men had returned to their fishing, Emma said that she really supposed she must be going. She had never felt a greater reluctance to move, and brought out the conventional phrase only after many delays, when she felt that her long-contented sitting was becoming noticeable.

"But you can't," said Miss Dermot. "The sidecar has a wheel off and the trap's gone into Ballyknock with the laundry. Besides, there's only one pony."

"Oh," said Emma, entertaining and then cautiously repressing hope, "perhaps I could walk, then. I rather think Mrs. Joyce will be expecting me for supper."

"Oh no she won't. People generally stay the night when they come here. Didn't the boy tell you to bring a bag?"

"He may have," said Emma, exquisitely careful not to nip this bud of promise, "but I found it very difficult to understand what he said."

"Oh, very likely. Never mind, I can lend you something. Though my nightgowns will be ludicrously short, I promise you. I envy that superb height of yours. You're almost as tall as Edward."

"I suppose I am," said Emma, looking pleased. Longing to hear more of him she added, "How nice he is, Miss Dermot."

"Isn't he?" Miss Dermot gave her a warm, approving look. "He's a good boy, he has a great capacity for happiness. He's one of those people nature intended to be happy."

"He seems to be," said Emma, clasping her hands with the air of a child settling down to an expected story.

"Well, you know, I don't think he is happy, very. He dissipates his talents. He's too much taken up with all these politics and socialism to be a good doctor, and too much interested in people to make a politician. He's settling down, though, I think. He's just bought a good general practice in Muswell Hill, and he was going to be married this summer."

"Was he?" said Emma, unable to keep the startled note out of her voice.

"Yes, yes; but it's all ended rather wretchedly. Not a bad thing, I think personally; I didn't care for the girl overmuch. But it's made him unhappy, and I don't like to see that."

"No," said Emma, "no." She cast about for some means of discovering more. "Did all this happen very recently?"

"Three or four months ago. I expect he's beginning to get over it. He has great resilience, but one's vanity suffers so in an affair like that. That's the worst part of it. I don't think he minds so much when he's here, fishing and enjoying himself with his funny little friend, but I think it'll be rather sad for him when he goes back to London."

"I suppose it will," said Emma.

"I try and make things as cheerful for him as I can while he's here," said Miss Dermot, "but an old woman's company isn't really what he needs, and these are depressing times for everybody. I wish I knew when the war was going to end."

"It can't last much longer, surely," said Emma, who had completely forgotten it.

"Oh yes, it can. The Boers are a very sturdy, obstinate people. Such a mistake to think that they could be put in their places like a lot of blacks."

"That's what my father says," said Emma. "He always says he's more than half in sympathy with the Boers, but of course he doesn't say so outside the family. Or even inside it very much, now. My sister's husband was killed, you see, quite recently."

"Oh dear," said Miss Dermot absently, "what a pity. I sometimes think it would have been a good thing if Edward had enlisted; it would have taken him out of himself, you know. But a doctor has his own duty to society, and some of these socialists take a very obstinate line about the war. In some ways I'm almost inclined to

agree with them. At least Edward has the courage of his convictions, and they're very unpopular ones, too, at the moment."

"I sometimes think," said Emma, remembering Leonard, an indistinct and far-off figure out of the past, "that a lot of people only enlist because they're more afraid of what people will say if they don't than they are of being killed."

"Of course they do. It's very pleasant to be put right in the eyes of the world. But Edward's a very uncompromising person in some ways. He's never influenced at all by what people think of him. If it weren't for the kindness of his nature I'd say he had the makings of a really ruthless man."

"Do you really? Ruthless in what way?"

"Oh," said Miss Dermot, frowning a little, "in matters of principle. If he were a stern or harsh character it would be apparent at once, but there's so much kindness and gentleness in him that one's tempted to think of him as being just pleasant and agreeable and cosy, like an eiderdown. Whereas really he's about as inflexible as one of those new wire mattresses that I dislike so much."

Emma laughed.

"Talking of which," said Miss Dermot, "I'd better take you upstairs and show you your room, and see what I can find you in the way of night clothes. We don't dress for dinner when the wind's in this quarter because we very often fish afterwards. At least, Edward does, and sometimes little Mr. Parry does as well, but he's more often inclined to be lazy. He likes to play picquet with me in the evenings, but tonight I expect they'll be guided by what you want to do."

"I don't play picquet, I'm afraid."

"Then we can all fish, or at least you and I can sit on a rug and watch. It's very lovely down by the river at night, so soft and luminous even before the moon rises, and afterwards it's just magical. Well, you'll see. Or have you had too much fresh air for one day?"

"No, indeed," said Emma eagerly, "I've felt ever since I came to Ireland as though I'd come into the open for the first time. I can't think how I shall bear to go back to London." Or to Dawes, she thought, or the Websters, or any of that old and fruitless life.

"Good, good, excellent," said Miss Dermot, getting up with a rustle of her purple skirts, "you are a sensible young woman, as sensible as you are good-looking; a rare combination." She led the way upstairs, talking as she went, pausing on the landing to open several

doors and find out which of the many rooms Emma had already seen with Edward.

"He didn't show you his own room, I'll be bound," said Miss Dermot, "nor mine either, for that matter, since I was asleep in it."

"No, he didn't," said Emma; "I should like to see them both."

"So you shall, so you shall. Mine's the best room in the house, naturally. I've slept in it for nearly sixty years, ever since my mother died, which is the same as saying ever since I was a girl. We come to it presently, at the end of the passage, but I'll show you Edward's first, up this little flight of stairs."

She turned up it as she spoke, grasping the handrail, and Emma followed, full of a pleased and intimate curiosity. It was prying, of course, since he had not chosen to show the room himself, but somehow excusable and necessary, since it would tell her much. She went quickly in past Miss Dermot, her senses alert for the strange flavor of his masculine privacy.

"A bare room, you see," said Miss Dermot, looking round it, "but he's had it ever since he was a boy, and I think he's fond of it. In some ways it has the best view in the house."

Emma looked about her, feeling the slight check of disappointment. The room told her nothing. It was big and frugal and full of air and light, a hollow shell fretted by many windows; the brass bedstead, the cane-bottomed chairs, the orderly arrangement of books on the bedside table, might have belonged to anybody. There was no clue anywhere to give her a special insight, or, if there were, she somehow failed to find it.

"Well, thank you for showing it to me," she said at length, lingering with a sort of timid hunger. If she had been alone she could have examined his books, laid her hand on the coat that hung at the back of the door, taken up the gold repeater from its shabby case and held it to her ear. She would have been able to establish a personal relationship with the room, to have carried away at least a fragment of knowledge.

"Not at all," said Miss Dermot. "Come along to mine, now; it's better worth seeing. You may as well see all there is to see, know all there is to know, even if you never set eyes on us again." She preceded Emma down the few stairs and along the passage, humming under her breath. "I've had a lot of pleasure in my life," she said musingly, "out of chance encounters. Take my advice and never be

afraid of them. It would be charming if we were all to meet again some day, but if we don't, well, we're none the poorer, and we've had some pleasure at least out of this day's acquaintance."

Emma said nothing, since there was nothing to express the queer constriction of the heart, the sudden prophetic tremor which ran through her, rejecting with pain the thought of parting from him in this first moment of coming together. Swallowing childish and quite inexplicable tears, she stared blindly at the decayed splendors of Miss Dermot's bedroom.

Chapter VIII

(1906)

MRS. SHARDILOE WALKED SLOWLY DOWN GRASMERE Avenue, leaning a little theatrically on her parasol, pausing every now and then to breathe heavily and look over the low privet hedges into front gardens, new and bright with begonias and calceolarias and the self-conscious nursery perfection of standard roses. A nice road, she thought. Everything new and pretty and up to date. Curtains in tasteful art shades in nearly all the windows, and plenty of white paint; everything so modestly prosperous and tidy, an "up and coming" district. A pity, though, that the road was so very steep. "A long way from the bus," she complained under her breath; "I shouldn't like to have to walk it every day."

She stopped at number 14 and laid her hand on the gate. It was like every other gate in the road, an artistic wooden half-door with heart-shaped cutouts and a small green-and-white enamel plaque denying hawkers and circulars; but it had the distinction of a solid professional brass plate which always pleased her, and she never failed to read the flowing copperplate inscription, "Dr. Edward Boyd Massingham," name full of reliability and prestige, before she lifted the latch. A smaller replica of the plate, winking in the white front door above the letter box, held her pleased attention while she rang the bell.

A plump maid in lilac print answered the door, and at sight of the imposing figure on the doorstep, confused impression of big hat, trailing draperies and rouged and ruined beauty, stepped back with a pleasant smile.

"Good afternoon, Aggie," said Mrs. Shardiloe in her grand yet kindly tone, the tone she reserved for children and other people's servants. "Is Mrs. Massingham at home?"

"Oh yes, madam. She's sitting in the garden. I was only waiting to take tea out until you came."

She led Mrs. Shardiloe through the drawing room, a neat modern

apartment furnished in pink and cream with blue-and-white china plates round the picture rail and a pink accordion-pleated silk petticoat on the electric light. A flattering room, as Mrs. Shardiloe knew. She stepped out with stately deliberation through the French windows.

Emma was sitting in a basket chair under a drooping cherry tree whose branches had been spread and propped with stakes to form an arbor, the one gracious feature in the symmetrical fenced oblong of suburban green, relic of the days before Grasmere Avenue had been built and strangely stranded among the asphalt paths and trellis fencing which repeated themselves in every garden the whole length of the road. Emma stirred welcomingly in her chair, but did not get up.

"Well, darling. Here I am, you see. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty well, Mother. Come and sit down in the shade. Tea will be out in a minute. Are you exhausted?"

"I *really* am." Mrs. Shardiloe sank down in the other chair with heavy creakings. "It's this heat. The buses were just like ovens. I shouldn't mind so much if I could ride on top, but I simply daren't attempt the stairs. I wish you lived nearer," she added plaintively; "it takes half the day to get to Muswell Hill from Brixton."

"I wish I did, too," said Emma untruthfully. It was nice to have her mother come over once in a while, but she would have hated any regular encroachment on her delicious privacy. She smiled with tolerant affection at Mrs. Shardiloe, knowing she must lend an appearance of interest to her discomforts and ailments before reopening the one absorbing topic.

"Well now, tell me, dear, exactly how are you feeling? Is Edward quite satisfied with you?"

"Yes, he's very pleased on the whole. He makes me take a little walk every day, but I find the hot weather rather trying. I used to go as far as Highgate Woods, but I can't do that now. I feel too conspicuous."

"I *know*," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "It's dreadful, isn't it? You've almost doubled your size since I last saw you. I really think you ought to wear some kind of corset." Her eyes traveled over Emma's body with a mixture of curiosity and distaste. An angry disgust still faintly lingered from her own confinements. "You look very well all the same, I must admit. Have you seen the monthly nurse?"

"She came yesterday. I have a dreadful feeling I shan't be able to

like her, but she's one of Dr. Holland's pets, and Edward says that she's probably very good and that I mustn't fuss."

"Dear me! One would think Edward was having the baby, not you. The only comfort in a confinement is being able to fuss as much as one likes. It was the only satisfaction I ever got out of it."

Emma smiled with the superior assurance of a younger woman.

"Oh, Edward's right really, you know. After all, it's a perfectly natural function."

"You won't think so when you're performing it," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "Of all the messy, abominable, badly arranged processes . . . However, I don't want to frighten you. I dare say Edward knows best. Doctors are cleverer nowadays, I imagine, than when I was young. I had an abominable monthly nurse when Lily was born, a real Gamp. She never touched me without hurting me, never brushed my hair without pulling it, and never passed the end of the bed without kicking it like a mule. I used to think she must be drunk to be so clumsy, but I never smelt it on her, so I suppose she had no understandable human weaknesses. She simply delighted in torture for its own sake."

The maid came out through the French windows bearing a tray, and Mrs. Shardiloe broke off in her reminiscences to stare with disappointment at the bread and butter.

"Doesn't Edward allow you any pastries either?"

"Well, he would, but we never bother with them in the afternoon. People don't eat as much nowadays as they used, you know. It's much healthier not to."

"Is it? I'm afraid my stoutness is constitutional; I really don't think it's anything to do with diet." Mrs. Shardiloe had given up the struggle with her middle-aged greed: with beauty so cruelly destroyed by age, why forfeit the sad compensation of appetite as well? "I'm afraid Lily's going to take after me, too. She's putting on weight like anything, though she won't admit it. She's started much younger than I did. I was as thin as a rake until after I was thirty."

Emma raised her eyebrows with amused patronage.

"Yes, of course, she's the type, poor thing. How is she, by the way?"

"Oh, very well, you know. You needn't be sorry for her. I think she'll marry that Mr. Butler of hers before long. He's very devoted; he doesn't know what he's taking on, especially with the child. I

can't think what's possessed Lily to bring her up so badly. I was very fond of Suzanne as a baby, but she's quite unbearable now. Such a gawky child, too; she looks much more than seven."

"I shouldn't have thought she'd have cared for an old husband," said Emma, helping herself fastidiously to bread and butter.

"Oh my dear, he's not *old*. You can't call a man of fifty *old*. He's very vigorous, considering, and extremely well off. Your father was saying only yesterday that hotel property in Brighton is simply a gold mine nowadays. You can't help making money. Lily will be very comfortable."

"I thought what Mr. Butler had were boardinghouses."

"Oh no, dear. Private hotels. And the one he lives in is very good class, you know; it has a license."

Emma looked expectantly toward the house and smiled.

"So Lily will be a publican's wife," she said. "I dare say it'll suit her, especially if she's going to get so fat."

"Now, Em, don't be spiteful. The first Mrs. Butler was every inch a lady, and think how nice it'll be to have somewhere in Brighton to go to. It'll be splendid for you to take the child there later on."

"I shall take the child to Ireland," said Emma loftily. "Edward's Aunt Geraldine is frightfully anxious for us to go."

"Oh well," said Mrs. Shardiloe, envious and doubtful, "of course, if you can go *there*. I should like to see the castle myself one of these days, and Miss Dermot as well for that matter. I suppose she never comes to London?"

"Hardly ever. Why should she? I don't think she's been since that time I first met her, going back to Ballyknock; nearly five years ago now."

"No, I suppose not. Still, I always thought it a little odd that she never came to your wedding. I suppose she despises us."

"Not at all. She thinks we're a romantic family, I've often heard her say so. She takes the view that I'm a mysterious character who appeared out of nowhere, and she's built up a fancy picture of all my relations."

Mrs. Shardiloe laughed.

"Mysterious! Well, I suppose you were. You were always a queer girl, you used to worry me sometimes. And you did appear out of nowhere as far as she was concerned. My word, I was angry at the time! I laugh sometimes when I think how it's all turned out so well.

I don't think Lily's forgiven you even yet." Mrs. Shardiloe took a cigarette out of her large handbag and lit it reflectively, cupping the match in hands that were still delicate and distinguished. "I know what I meant to tell you," she said, throwing the spent match on the grass. "Who d'you think I ran into the other day? Your Mr. Dawes! I was just going to turn in at the gate when I saw him crossing the road, and he came at once and spoke to me. He's just got back from America and was on his way to have tea with Mrs. Webster. I *was* glad to see him! He asked after you most particularly, and wanted your address."

Emma looked up quickly.

"Did you give it him?"

"Well, as a matter of fact I did. I didn't see any harm. I always thought it a pity you dropped him so completely. He's such a very clever man, and you were getting on so well; it was all so *interesting*." She looked at Emma a little wistfully.

"I didn't really drop him deliberately, Mother. Everybody made it so unpleasant at the time, if you remember. It took me a long time to get over all that business, and then afterwards, you know, there was Edward, and I more or less lost interest."

"Well, that's very understandable, but wouldn't it be rather nice, now, to get in touch with him again? He's done awfully well in America; they were very impressed with him. He showed me a piece out of a newspaper, all about a speech he had made at some spiritualist meeting. It was very small print and I hadn't got my glasses with me, so I couldn't read anything but the headings, but it was very long and looked ever so important. 'Well-Known London Medium,' they called him."

"Dear me," said Emma, "he does sound grand." Her gaze wandered uncertainly to the house, watching for Edward.

"Well, he looked very prosperous, I can tell you. He's filled out a little bit; he looks much better. He asked after you and Lily ever so kindly. He knew all about you being married, apparently. I expect Mrs. Webster told him."

"Well. So they're still on visiting terms, are they?"

"Apparently. Oh, very much so, I think. She's a lonely woman, you know, since Mr. Webster died. I never liked her, but I can't help feeling rather sorry for her now. Lily goes to see her occasionally, but only for the sake of the child. She's got nobody else, you see, to leave her money to."

"What about Mr. Dawes?" said Emma, looking at her fingers.

"Oh, I think he's well provided for. I don't know exactly what the position is, but he got a good share of the business when Mr. Webster died. Anyway, he's a partner and director, isn't he? He told me he'd been studying the American shops while he was over there, and was going to introduce some new ideas into Websters'. She's very lucky to have a man like that to look after her business for her. He told me he was very much in her confidence."

"I see. And what does Lily think about it all?"

"Oh, well. You know what Lily is. She never has a good word to say for him, of course, but she's jolly careful not to let on to Mrs. Webster. I often tell her, she nearly cooked her own goose with *that* family five years ago. She's been more careful since. It doesn't do to make enemies."

"Not where money's concerned, you mean," said Emma. "Lily would see that, all right. So she's pocketed her pride, I suppose, and hopes they've all forgotten how badly she behaved."

"Well, dear," said Mrs. Shardiloe tolerantly, "I think it was all rather silly. She was very much upset by Leonard's death. So were we all. I don't suppose we shall ever know the whole truth about that occasion. There may have been faults on both sides, but the fact remains, Lily was *always* very hostile, there's no getting away from it, and as to Mr. Dawes, he's proved his genuineness over and over again. They wouldn't be taken in in America, would they? They're much more advanced than we are in spiritualism, he says. After all, the whole thing *began* there, didn't it, with the Fox sisters? And they have some wonderful mediums nowadays, so he says." She blew out a long jet of cigarette smoke and looked at Emma speculatively, her head on one side. "What do *you* think, dear? I know you don't like discussing it, but after all, all that unpleasantness was a very long time ago. Everybody's had time to revise their opinions."

Emma said nothing, but smiled guardedly.

"At the time," Mrs. Shardiloe went on, "I had moments of doubts, I must confess. Lily was so very positive and insistent. But after you rushed off to Ireland like that, and I was so dreadfully frightened and worried, I began to see that we had nothing but Lily's word to go on, and really, as your Aunt Nellie said, she was obviously quite beside herself at the time. And I couldn't believe, no, I *couldn't* believe, that either you or Mr. Dawes would deliberately make game of us

like that. Why should you? Nobody knows better than I do that you *had* these psychic powers, right from a child. Why should you suddenly take it into your head to pretend?"

Emma was silent for a minute, fingering the gold padlock on her bracelet.

"It's taken you a long time," she said at last, "to come to that conclusion."

"No, no, it hasn't, dear. I've thought so for a long time. Before you came back from Ireland, even, I was more than half-convinced that Lily was in the wrong. I tried to tell you so when you came back, but you were so queer about it, you bit my head off whenever I tried to speak. And then, soon afterwards, you were so taken up with Edward, and as soon as you got engaged you seemed to have a real horror of the subject, so I let it alone."

"Can you wonder?" said Emma emphatically. "Nobody will ever know what a shock it was to me, how much it upset me. You, most of all. I wasn't surprised at Lily—she's always hated me, I think, and been jealous of anything I did. But you, who *knew* . . . who'd been so close to me through it all . . ." She shook her head, as if refusing too painful a recollection, and then sighed. "I was so unhappy, I couldn't bear to reopen the subject. If it hadn't been for Edward, I don't think I should ever have got over it."

Mrs. Shardiloe put out an impulsive hand and squeezed Emma's arm. "There," she said. "I know. I know exactly what you must have felt. Thank God I've got some imagination; though it's a curse in some ways, it makes one suffer so. One suffers through other people's unhappiness as well as one's own." Mrs. Shardiloe lay back in her chair and closed her eyes, the better to appreciate her own depths. "But now," she said, opening them again suddenly, "now that's all over and forgotten, why don't you take it up again? It was such a *fascinating* hobby. And you were doing so wonderfully well! I sometimes *long* to go to a nice *séance* again."

"Oh," said Emma, smiling. "I haven't time nowadays. It isn't a thing one takes up in the evenings, like poker work. It's a serious study."

"Oh, of course, you don't want to start it just at the moment. But when the baby's born, and you're strong again, it would be so *well* worth while. I'm sure Edward would be interested in it, too. He and Mr. Dawes would find so much to say to one another! I believe a

great many doctors are interested in spiritualism, and Mr. Dawes has always said it was the *scientific* approach that mattered."

"No, Edward wouldn't be interested," said Emma, slightly frowning. "He's interested in a lot of things, but not in that."

"Well, but dear! It's such a waste of your talents. And he's so clever, it would be wonderful to get him to take it up. I really must talk to him about it this afternoon."

"No, Mother, don't, please. We've never really discussed it. He knows, I think, that I used to be rather interested in it, but I saw that he didn't approve, and I've kept away from the subject."

"Dear me!" Mrs. Shardiloe laughed sardonically, raising her eyebrows. "You *are* a patient Griselda! I should never have suspected it. I must say I think you're very foolish to suppress your own talent and interest because of a vague idea you have that Edward mightn't share it."

"It's no sacrifice," said Emma lightly. "I'm no longer so terribly interested myself."

"Oh, rubbish! You won't talk like that when you've been married another year or two. I know a husband can seem very absorbing when you've only been married eighteen months—and don't think I'm running Edward down, I think he's *splendid*—but really, Em, you mustn't obliterate yourself. He won't think any the better of you, believe me. I regret *to this day* having given up the stage when I did. If only I'd considered my career, instead of your father, what a different life I should be leading now! New interests, new friends, traveling about . . ." She waved her lace handkerchief with an expressive flourish. "Whereas now, look at me! Out of touch. Forgotten. Gone to seed—oh yes, I know it! Tied to that gloomy house and a man who hardly speaks from one day's end to the next." Her eyes filled with tears and she covered them quickly with her hand. "There," she said. "I won't talk about myself, it's too depressing. Nobody wants to hear about you when you're old and ugly."

"Oh, Mother!"

"Yes, old and ugly. Old and ugly and *fat*," said Mrs. Shardiloe, spitting the last word with dramatic self-disgust. "And the bitterest part of it is," she went on, taking her hand away from her face and looking up with a sort of piteous brightness, "that I'm quite convinced in my case the stoutness is constitutional, nothing whatever to do with diet. If I *starved* myself it wouldn't make any difference,

which perhaps has its bright side, for my appetite's better than it's ever been."

"Well, Edward, for one, thinks you eat too much," said Emma a little peevishly. "Why don't you ask his advice about diet? Look, here he is. Only please don't say anything about Mr. Dawes, Mother. I'd rather you didn't."

Mrs. Shardiloe composed her face, which had got a little out of hand, into an expression of expectant sweetness, and turned to watch Edward's approach across the lawn. He came with pleasant eagerness, the sun flashing blindly on his spectacles, and took both her outstretched hands.

"Well, Susan! This *is* a treat. How brave of you to come so far in this beastly heat."

Mrs. Shardiloe smiled affectionately, enjoying, as she always did, his use of her Christian name. With Edward it was possible to feel young and handsome again.

"Well, there. It's worth any trouble to see you both again, and looking so well. I only wish you lived a little bit nearer."

Edward poured himself a cup of tea and sat down with it on the grass, laying a hand lightly on Emma's foot.

"Well, how d'you think the patient looks, Susan? Blooming, isn't she?"

"She certainly looks very well. Wonderfully well, considering. The last month's a very trying time, Edward. No man ever realizes quite how trying it is."

"Oh, I do," said Edward, "nobody better. I have a lot of tiresome patients, you know, and they enable me to judge just how sensible and good-tempered Emma is."

"Oh, I think she's phenomenal. Still, one will be very thankful when the whole thing's over. *Such* an unpleasant business. I hope this Dr. Holland of yours is a humane man?"

"Of course he is. Now, don't you start frightening her with your old-fashioned tales. It doesn't do to think about it all the time."

"Oh, I agree," said Mrs. Shardiloe, retrieving her position. "The great thing is to keep busy with one's everyday interests as long as possible. I was telling Emma only this afternoon that she ought to think of taking up her hobbies again when it's all over."

"Now, Mother," said Emma, frowning, "you know what I asked you."

"Hobbies?" said Edward, looking surprised and slightly incredulous. "I didn't know she had any."

"I haven't," said Emma. "Mother's talking nonsense."

"My dear, that's very unkind of you when I'm only suggesting it for your good. I think it's such a shame that you should waste your gifts, and I'm sure Edward would agree with me. Our talents were given us to make use of, not to hide under a bushel, as it says in the Bible. Weren't they, Edward?"

"I imagine so. Which ones, exactly, are you referring to?"

"Mother, *please!*"

"No, Em, I *will* say what's in my mind." She turned an earnest face to her son-in-law. "I'm referring to Emma's mediumistic gifts, which she *must* have told you about? They're quite, quite remarkable. She was really making a name for herself before she was married, and several people have asked me about her lately. I didn't know what to say. It seems so foolish to admit that she's just let the whole thing drop."

"How you do exaggerate," said Emma. "It wasn't anything very wonderful or important. I told you about it, dear, ages ago—when Mother and I used to go to occasional séances with the Websters."

"Oh, that," said Edward, feeling about for his pipe. "Yes, I believe you did. I'm afraid I don't remember very much about it."

"There!" said Mrs. Shardiloe. "Well, that just shows how completely Emma must have misled you. Really, you are a naughty girl! It wasn't at all just a matter of going to a few séances, Edward. There's a wonderful medium called Mr. Dawes, and he took a tremendous interest in Emma, and gave her a lot of training. In the end she was getting more wonderful results than Mr. Dawes himself. Really she was; it astonished everybody. Mr. Dawes always said she had a great future in front of her as a medium. I do wish you'd persuade her to take it up again, Edward. It *was* so fascinating."

Edward glanced up sideways for a moment, raising his eyebrows, and then down again, busy with his pipe. He lit it carefully and pressed the spent match into the grass.

"M'm," he said. "Well, she will if she wants to, I imagine. It's not for me to persuade her." Emma said nothing.

"Oh, but it is!" cried Mrs. Shardiloe, clasping her hands. "It's dreadful to waste a gift like that—such an important gift! It was all on account of a silly quarrel with Lily that she gave it up, and she

hasn't raised a finger about it since. *I* think Lily was very much in the wrong; so do we all; and only yesterday I saw Mr. Dawes quite by accident; he's just come back from America; and he was shocked, really shocked, to hear that she'd given up her mediumship."

Edward looked up thoughtfully at Mrs. Shardiloe and then smiled; the easy, friendly smile which Emma knew so well, the disguise which so perfectly concealed whatever he was thinking.

"Well," he said, "I'd no idea it was as serious as that. I must hear all about it some time. It's not very much in my line, I'm afraid; my advice won't be worth anything."

"Nonsense, Edward. A clever man like you *ought* to be interested. He really ought to meet Mr. Dawes, oughtn't he, Em? I'm sure they'd find they had a great deal in common. Mr. Dawes says it's quite surprising how many doctors are interested in the movement. He welcomes them, he says."

"He sounds an interesting chap," said Edward politely. "Does he make his living as a medium?"

"Oh *dear* no. He has a very good position in Websters' now. Enough to make him quite independent, I believe, if he chose to retire. I wouldn't be surprised if he eventually came into the whole business. Oh, he's *never* believed in making money out of his powers. Lily was for Emma taking it up professionally, if she took it up at all, but Mr. Dawes always advised against it."

Edward looked surprised.

"Was there ever any question of that?"

"No, of course not," said Emma crossly; "Mother exaggerates everything."

"Oh, no I don't, dear. Why be so modest about it? You amazed everybody. You know, Edward, it was not only *direct voice* she got, it was *materializations*! I was fascinated by it myself at the time, and so was everybody else. The Websters thought the world of her. I shall never cease to think it a crime if she continues to neglect it.

Edward lifted his eyes again to his wife's face, but seeing her dubious and uncomfortable did not pursue the subject.

"Well, well," he said, "I shall look forward to hearing more when Emma feels like it. You're a mysterious family, aren't you?—always discovering new talents that I knew nothing about. It would never surprise me to hear that you could charm snakes or even walk the

tightrope, and out of sheer indolent indifference had omitted to mention it."

Mrs. Shardiloe laughed.

"Now you're teasing me. But I suppose, if you look at it like that, we are rather an extraordinary family. I sometimes wonder why we've never made more of ourselves. Lily has great gifts, you know, if she would only use them, and their father used to say that if I hadn't been trained as a singer I should have made quite a name for myself as a serious actress. I always laugh at him, but of course he's quite a good judge. He was in management for years." Fondling her lost chances, Mrs. Shardiloe fell into a mood of romantic melancholy.

When she had gone, turning to kiss her fingertips to Emma before disappearing through the French windows with the glide of a prima donna, Edward came back into the garden and sat down in her empty chair. The shade of the cherry tree had advanced now almost to the house, and only the tops of the border hollyhocks, pale dusty buds and lemon-colored rosettes, still struck into the sunlight. A few gardens away a lawn mower advanced and retreated methodically and in the lane at the bottom of the garden some children were playing hopscotch, cheerful suburban noises of leisure and peace. Deep in her shade, Emma bent her head over her sewing, and did not look up.

"Tired, darling?"

"A little. I find Mother's visits rather an effort." She frowned slightly over her work, apparently unwilling to talk. Edward considered her.

"M'm. She seemed to have rather a bee in her bonnet this afternoon. What was it all about?"

"What was what about?"

"All these speeches about your wasted talents, and spiritualism and so on. Were you really as much involved in it as she said?"

Emma hesitated, uncertain from his tone which way his thoughts were going. If, as she had always suspected, he would be hostile to the subject, it was better denied. If, on the other hand, he could be interested, surprised, impressed even, then perhaps . . . She glanced up from her sewing and saw him attentive and kindly, inviting confidence.

"Oh," she said, feeling her way, "it's not the sort of thing you'd care for, I'm afraid. It was very absorbing at the time. I sometimes think

. . . but then, there's never time for everything. I don't think I'm really sorry I gave it up."

"But what was it that you gave up? Don't be so cagey about it. I'm interested in everything to do with you; you know that."

Emma smiled, drawn on in spite of herself by his curiosity. Well, it *had* been interesting. It wasn't everybody who had such remarkable things to reveal, and that after a year and a half of married life. Perhaps she had been wrong in supposing that Edward would laugh or disapprove. Perhaps she had been foolish to drop so simply into the role of doctor's wife, discarding her more mysterious investments.

"Well," she said, with a resigned sigh to show that the subject was of no importance and could be dismissed at a moment's notice if it failed to impress, "it all began a long time ago, when Mother and I were invited to a few séances at the Websters'. There was this Mr. Dawes that she told you about—he had developed himself quite remarkably as a medium, and they used to get all sorts of messages. They'd lost a daughter some time before, you know, Lily's husband's sister. I used to know her at school." She stopped to bite off the end of her cotton and watch Edward's expression.

"I see; Leonard's sister," said Edward, nodding. "Go on."

"Well, it was rather extraordinary. I'd never been to anything of the kind before, and I was bit frightened. I didn't like Dawes much, but in a strange way he impressed me."

"Impressed you as what?"

"As—as a remarkable man, a man with definite powers. I was quite open-minded on the subject."

"Of course. So what happened?"

"Well, something happened which it's rather difficult to describe, even now. I fell into a sort of trance—it was rather frightening—and heard myself (or perhaps it wasn't myself, I've never known) speaking with Dolly's voice."

"Good heavens, did you really?" said Edward: "this is very interesting."

"Well, that first time wasn't much, and might have been explained in a dozen ways. But Dawes was very excited, and felt sure that I possessed some mediumistic gift, and wanted to develop it. They were all very keen that I should. So for some months I sort of studied the subject under Mr. Dawes's guidance; without any definite ideas, you know, but just to see if he was right."

"But this is wonderful!" said Edward, looking really pleased. "I've always wanted to hear this kind of story from the inside. Tell me everything that happened."

Emma hesitated, choosing her words with care to leave a loophole.

"Nothing much happened at first. I got very discouraged, and wanted to give it up, only he wouldn't let me. And then, rather to my surprise, I found that, given the right state of mind, I could slip quite easily into trance—more easily, I believe, even than he did."

"Trance?" said Edward. "Now what exactly do you mean by that? Can you describe it?"

"Not very well. The first feeling was a—a sort of slipping away, a receding, if you know what I mean. And then, if one went on, it was like unconsciousness, or sleep; an uneasy kind of sleep sometimes and rather nightmarish, but it got easier with practice." She dropped her sewing in her lap with a little deprecating laugh. "The absurd thing is, that I could go off now, as easy as anything, just by talking about it! Sometimes I think about it in bed at night, and I have to pinch myself to stop. I used to get the same sort of thing occasionally as a child, always rather terrifying. I've never quite got used to it."

Edward smoked his pipe in silence and she said no more, waiting for a sign which should tell her how she was faring.

"Very curious," he said at last, and paused. "Are you sure it had no physical explanation? Did you never discuss it with a doctor, or investigate it from any point of view other than a spiritualist one?"

"Oh yes, I did, of course," said Emma, struck with this idea. "I talked to Dr. Ashe, our family doctor, about it. Without telling my mother, you know," she added hastily. "I didn't want to worry her."

"And what did he say?"

"He couldn't account for it at all. He said it was outside his province. He wasn't a spiritualist, but he took the point of view that there were a lot of things that doctors couldn't explain. 'You can't dissect the soul,' he said. 'You can't put the spirit under a microscope.' So I gave up worrying about it, and let things take their course."

"Very curious," said Edward again. "Awfully puzzling. How long did the condition last, once you had got into it?"

"It varied. Sometimes an hour, sometimes much less. I don't know what it depended on."

"And did you feel ill afterwards? Were there any aftereffects?"

"Sometimes a headache, but usually I just felt tired, like you some-

times do after vivid and exhausting dreams. I usually felt tired, I think, in proportion to the results."

"Results?"

"Well, yes, you know; the trances weren't as blank as they appeared to me. There wouldn't have been much point in them for the others if they had been, would there?" She laughed, meeting his eyes frankly.

"I was beginning to wonder what they got out of it," said Edward, smiling. "What *did* happen?"

"All sorts of things, apparently. Lights. Voices. Dolly used to come through nearly always and talk to her parents, and after his death in South Africa Leonard did as well. That was what the row was about, when I ran away to Ireland and met you on the boat. I've always said that it was just a family quarrel, but really it all started with Lily, after Leonard came through. She said I was pretending."

"And were you?" said Edward, so casually that for a fraction of a second she hardly heard him, and then sat still, letting the shock run through her.

"Damn," she said; "it's too hot to sew. I do nothing but prick myself. No, of course I wasn't pretending, dear. Why do you think I'm telling you all this, if it was all pretense? Really, you do say the most hurtful things. I'm sorry I began it."

"No, no, it's I who ought to be sorry," said Edward, leaning forward and laying his hand affectionately on her knee. "I apologize. I didn't mean to suggest anything of the kind; I just want to arrive at the facts. You see, all this seems to me so very interesting and important, and at the same time puzzling, that I want to ask you all sorts of questions. This is all new ground to me, so you must forgive me for asking what at first appeared to me to be an obvious one."

"Well, of course," said Emma, recovering herself, and realizing with a mixture of relief and dismay that she had burned her boats and was now committed to the old familiar course of explanation; "it was silly of me to be offended, because that was just the sort of question I used to ask myself about Mr. Dawes, before my own experience convinced me."

"It's your own experience I want to hear about," said Edward. "These voices, for instance; how were they produced?"

"I wish I knew!" said Emma. "You see, I was never conscious of anything that was going on while I was in trance. I was only told

about it afterwards. There are lots of theories as to how psychic forces work. I don't pretend to know which is the right one."

"Yes, but what was the *effect*?" said Edward; "where did these voices come from? How were they heard? Was it the same as that first occasion, when it was you who spoke, or thought you did? Or how? You must remember that I've never been to any of these meetings."

"Well, sometimes, apparently, the voices did speak through me; using my voice, that is, but at the same time quite recognizable as somebody else. At other times they came from different parts of the room. Don't ask me to tell you how, because I simply don't know."

"And the lights?"

"I used to see those occasionally," said Emma cautiously, "as I was coming out of trance. Very faint, bluish sort of lights; phosphorescent almost. Very difficult things they were to be sure about, because if you tried to pin them down they sort of swam, and disappeared."

"That might easily have been your eyes," said Edward. "Have you ever had them examined?"

"No, I haven't," said Emma shortly. "I'm quite sure you could explain all of it, though, quite simply and easily."

"My dear, I'm only suggesting different possibilities. Certainly no abnormality of the eyes could account for the other things. What was it your mother was talking about? Materializations. Tell me about those."

"There's so little to tell," said Emma, leaning back in her chair with an appearance of fatigue and closing her eyes. "It only happened once, and naturally I didn't see it because I was in trance, or sleep, or whatever you like to call it. But Mrs. Webster saw her daughter's face materialize very distinctly, and several of the other sitters saw it too, though not as clearly as she did."

"They vouched for it, did they? Who were the other sitters?"

"Mr. Webster, and my mother, and a friend of hers called Miss Fairey, and Leonard on that particular occasion. And, of course, Mr. Dawes."

Edward looked at her consideringly for a moment, then bent down and carefully knocked out his pipe.

"What did you make of it yourself?" he asked. "Did you think, for instance, that this Mr. Dawes might have been responsible?"

"Do you mean by fraud?"

"By any means you like."

"Well, hardly. He's a middle-aged man, you know, and the face apparently was that of a young girl. Besides, Mrs. Webster could hardly have been mistaken about her own daughter."

"She might have been. Human evidence is very unreliable, especially where the emotions are involved. These things all take place in the dark, don't they? Well then, mightn't that have given scope to all sorts of clever deceptions on Dawes's part, supposing that he wanted to practice them?"

"It might," said Emma impartially, "though I hardly see how. He always struck me as a very serious and honest sort of man. He made nothing out of it. Besides, how in the world would you set about such a thing? And even if he succeeded in deceiving the others, how could he deceive *me*? My going into trance was none of his doing. The voices came through me, not him. Some of the psychic power came from him, obviously; he's a very advanced medium, and I dare say we shouldn't have got half the results if he hadn't been there. But he did nothing but sit in his chair, like the others. He was perfectly passive."

"How do you know? If you were completely unconscious during this trance I don't see how you could possibly keep a check on him."

"Well, when I say 'unconscious,' that isn't an altogether accurate description. It's difficult to put these things precisely into words, so one takes the nearest word one can find. I was conscious, sometimes, of a feeling of difficulty and struggle, as one might be through sleep. And sometimes I would feel a *presence* so strongly . . . that time that Leonard came through, for instance, that all the trouble was about, I was so aware of Leonard, even in trance, that I seemed to *see* him. It's rather like having a difficult and confused dream about somebody, and then waking up and being told that they've been in the room all the time. I don't think I can describe it any better than that."

There was a long silence, in which Emma picked up her sewing again and Edward rubbed the stem of his pipe gently against his chin, a trick he had when he was puzzled or ill at ease.

"It's all so queer to me," he said at length, "that I hardly know what to ask you, or where to begin. I feel rather like Dr. Ashe, that it's outside my province; but unlike him I feel that if these phenomena *do* occur, they *ought* to be capable of some kind of examination and analysis, not in a reverent or superstitious way at all, but as one might investigate the brain, or the behavior of electricity." He looked at her doubtfully. "You must make allowances, you know, for my enormous

skepticism, and not think that I'm doubting what you tell me. My instincts won't let me accept mysteries and spiritual explanations, and I'm rather glad they won't, because a reasonable skepticism is a very useful antiseptic to carry through life."

"I know, you're going to say that you're a materialist," said Emma, smiling.

"Well, I am. That doesn't mean that I'm any less interested in what you've been telling me. Rather the contrary. But I have to know what your own attitude is before I go any further. How do you explain these things in your own mind?"

"I can't, entirely," said Emma, remembering Dawes's line and feeling grateful for it. "One can't do more than try and find out. I've told you what I can."

"You've described your own sensations but you haven't told me how you accounted for them. You wouldn't, for instance, call yourself a convinced spiritualist? Do you believe that dead personalities exist in spirit form, and that they communicate through you?"

"What else can I believe?" said Emma. "I'm as puzzled as you are. What other theory . . ."

"I don't know," said Edward, "there may be plenty. But there already, you see, is a great difference between us. You find it difficult to accept any other explanation. I find it impossible to swallow. It would take a great deal more than that to convince me that the dead aren't dead, and safely delivered from their troubles. But that may have nothing to do with it, and most probably hasn't. There just happen to be enough people in the world who want it to be true, and enough people like—well, I don't know enough about this Mr. Dawes, so I won't libel him—who are clever enough to make a good thing out of it. There may be a thousand material explanations: the human brain is very complicated."

"Yes, but," said Emma boldly, "even supposing you were right about Mr. Dawes (and I don't think you are), what about my own experience? Skepticism is all very well, but I don't see why you should be so unwilling to accept an explanation which fits all the facts, especially when you haven't another to offer."

"Explanations can be made to fit facts, or, more precisely, appearances. A thunderstorm may be the rolling of God's chariot over the floor of heaven, or it may be the effect of electrical disturbances. Either explanation is satisfactory, according to what you believe. There

remains to decide, according to such knowledge as we have, which is the more probable. The one theory stands investigation, the other doesn't; and the chariot party never *will* investigate, because investigation's irreverent. I bet I shouldn't be far wrong in guessing that this Mr. Dawes is a very reverent man."

"He's a very serious man, if that's what you mean," said Emma. "He's always laid particular stress on the scientific approach."

"Has he? Well, that's very sensible. I should like to know how he defines scientific approach, and what he does about it. And you, yourself. How do you know that your impressions are entirely honest ones? It's very difficult to be certain."

"I shouldn't have thought it was at all difficult to know whether one was telling the truth or not," said Emma sharply. "I ought to have known you'd take that point of view. I did know it, as a matter of fact. That's why I've never discussed it before, and I shouldn't have done so now if you hadn't insisted."

"Oh, darling! We shall never get anywhere if you take offense like this at every turn. One *must* examine every possibility if one wants to arrive at any conclusion at all. You mustn't be so antagonistic to my questions. Really, darling, that isn't at all the way to inspire confidence."

Seeing her put her hand up to her eyes and turn away her head, he leaned forward and gently stroked her arm.

"Come now," he said coaxingly, "let's not talk about it any more if it upsets you. It's a disturbing subject, but we're not going to quarrel about it, whatever happens. Perhaps one day, when you feel like it, we'll go into it again. Get Mr. Dawes to come if you like, and your mother and the rest, and let's share these experiences. You see what a disadvantage I'm under, knowing it only in scraps, and by hearsay. Nothing would interest me so much as to see these things for myself, especially as they concern you so closely. Perhaps then I should be convinced beyond any argument; and even if I weren't, I shouldn't be quite such an ignorant opponent."

He continued to coax her and stroke her arm, and after a moment she turned her face to him with a rueful and self-accusing smile. She was not crying, as he had at first imagined.

"Forgive me," she said. "I'm touchy, aren't I? It's this beastly baby, I suppose. I can't bear quarreling either, and you shan't make me. And

I don't want to see Dawes again, or any of them. I gave it up years ago, as you know. It's all finished. Let's never talk about it again."

"Oh, but we will! Not now, but some other time. These things are terribly important and interesting, especially to me, if you're concerned in them. We'll go into it together."

"No, no. My life's full enough. And you're not really interested, are you, darling? You're only saying this to please me. I don't want you to pretend."

"I'm not pretending," said Edward earnestly. "How can I not be interested in any part of your mind or your experience? These strange things, which I don't understand at all, make you even more interesting and wonderful than you were before. On no account must you give it up because of some foolish notion you have that I should laugh at it. Surely you know me better than that? All I ask is that we should share these experiences; that I should be allowed to form my own judgment, and perhaps help yours. That's not pretending, is it?"

"No," said Emma, smiling, "but I'd rather not. Really I've done with it. I've got all I want. Why should I revive these things out of the past? What with you, and the baby, and the house and everything, I've really crammed as much into my life as one woman can manage." With an air of finality she began to fold up her sewing.

"Well, if you really feel like that," said Edward, "I don't want to persuade you. Though I rather agree with your mother—for different reasons, perhaps—that it may be a pity. However, that's for you to decide." He took out his watch and looked at it. "Good heavens, I ought to have been off a quarter of an hour ago. Damn! I shall have to run."

Emma looked up quickly.

"I didn't know you were going out this evening."

"Yes, you did, dear. Don't you remember? The Edlestons'. Fabian Society. I wish I hadn't got to go, but I must. Will you be all right?"

"I suppose so," said Emma, trying to keep disappointment out of her voice. "It won't make much difference whether I am or not, will it? A Fabian Society meeting is so important."

"In its way, yes," said Edward. "But do be sensible, darling, and tell me if you'll be all right? They're on the telephone. And I should go to bed early if I were you."

"I don't want to go to bed early. You know I can't sleep until you

come in. What a pity, there's salmon for supper. Never mind, it'll keep till tomorrow. I can have an egg or something."

"You have the salmon like a good girl. Darling, I really must run. I'll try not to be late."

He kissed her on the cheek and patted her shoulder, and Emma sat stiff and martyred under the caress.

"Perhaps," she said, "next month you could arrange not to have quite so many engagements. I don't particularly look forward to having the baby when I'm all alone in the house."

"Darling, I wouldn't go this evening if I hadn't promised to speak. Don't send me out feeling like a monster. If you're feeling as well as you look there's no need to worry. Get Aggie to bring her sewing in and sit with you if you don't like sitting alone. Anyway, there are the new library books."

"I'm not *quite* so dependent on company," said Emma in her mother's voice, "that I have to sit with the servant. Especially as she's given notice and only wants to talk about her boring young man. No, thank you. You hurry off to your meeting and don't worry about me. I'm quite capable of looking after myself."

"That's the spirit," said Edward, perversely accepting her words and ignoring their tone. She sat staring expressionlessly at the hollyhocks for some time after he had gone.

At last, catching sight of Aggie's cap at the kitchen window, she got up with a discontented face and went indoors. She was out of humor both with Edward and herself, and could think of nothing that she wanted to do. She wondered whether to go up to her bedroom and lie down; draw the curtains, perhaps, and put some eau-de-Cologne in her pillow; but the thought of dragging her heavy weight up the stairs was too discouraging; she sat down on the drawing-room sofa with a sigh of self-pity. It was inconsiderate of Edward to go out and leave her tonight, when she was not at all sure that she felt really well. Supposing anything should happen? In a way, of course, it would serve him right; but she could not even hope for so dramatic a revenge; it was too terrifying. She leaned back against the cushions and closed her eyes, studying her sensations. She had been conscious all afternoon of a vague discomfort—nothing more than usual, perhaps, but with a nervous quality about it which made her restless. Did she feel faintly sick, or was it only hunger? Her face was damp, and she could feel the

creeping of sweat under her clothes. This was curious, for the room was cool; chilly almost, after the long heat of the garden; and this emanation was not like the moisture of heat, but the prickling of some secret fear in the body, apprehensive and uneasy.

She sat up suddenly and pressed the electric bell. For a moment her fears had come too close to be dwelt upon. Nothing could happen, of course; she was simply tired; giving way to those morbid imaginings which Edward disapproved of and which were driven out of sight only when she was not alone; they emerged and clutched her in the dark of miserable night wakings, or when she passed the cupboard outside the bathroom, now stocked in all its antiseptic shelves with things which Dr. Holland had prescribed—rolls of cotton-wool, mackintosh sheets, an air cushion and other suggestive horrors. She had been upset, she decided, by her mother's visit and the long talk with Edward; a dangerous talk, perhaps; or had she been wise to open the long-closed subject, to prepare her defense at last against her mother's random talk, hints all the more likely to be scattered now that Dawes had returned? After all, there was no harm done. She had stated her case as safely as Dawes himself, and since she had made it clear that she had finished with the business, there was small danger of Edward wishing to pursue it.

Aggie knocked softly at the door and sidled in, closing it carefully behind her. Emma roused herself.

"The doctor won't be in to supper, Aggie. You'd better leave him some cocoa on the stove."

"All right, madam. Will you have yours now, or will you have a tray in bed? You look rather done in."

"No, I may as well have it in the dining room. Not the salmon, Aggie, keep that for tomorrow. You can boil me an egg. No—not an egg—" the thought was suddenly repellent—"I'll just have a little fried bacon, perfectly plain, and some tea and bread and butter."

"Very well, madam."

A thrill of discomfort that was almost pain made her crouch suddenly forward as the maid turned to go.

"And Aggie!"

"Yes, madam?"

"You might—will you—do you know how to look up a number in the telephone book? Well, try and find Mr. G. H. Edleston's number, and write it down and give it to me. It's a Hampstead address, I

think. Mr. G. H. Edleston." She spelled out the name, leaning anxiously forward, her arms folded on her knees. The strange alarm in her body died away as suddenly as it had come, and she was conscious once more of sweat gently creeping in the small of her back. She sat very still, staring at the empty grate, her nerves alert for what might have been the first whisper of a warning.

Presently the smell of bacon and Aggie's slippers squeaking to and fro in the hall told her that supper was ready, and feeling doubtfully better she went into the dining room. She must be hungry, she thought. The bacon smelled delicious. Nothing could be wrong if one could sit down with apparent appetite to a nice plate of bacon. She began to eat moodily, staring at the room without any of the satisfaction that it usually gave her. It was a solid room, not too heavily furnished, with an air discreetly hinting professional prosperity. It was the room where Edward's patients read the *Sphere* and *Illustrated London News*, and a neat pile of these magazines lay on the polished surface at the other end of the table. The dark embossed dado, the crimson curtains had been Emma's own choice; so, too, the treacle-colored oak furniture with twisted legs and the four pictures of Greek or Roman ladies with Edwardian coiffures and extravagant draperies who reclined on sculptured benches or fed doves beside marble balustrades as they disrobed for the bath. The clock had been a presentation to Edward from his hospital colleagues; the Chinese plates, arranged at careful intervals round the picture rail, Miss Dermot's wedding gift. Usually it was a room which Emma considered with pleasure, but tonight the crimson wallpaper was oppressive, even a little sinister; the chaste outlines of the Roman ladies mocked her. She fancied she caught a whiff of some antiseptic from the surgery next door, and the smell, real or imagined, was suddenly nauseous. She pushed away her plate, and as she did so the pain returned; definite this time, alien, unmistakable. She crouched forward in her chair, staring and holding her breath, watching with every sense turned inward for it to die away. "It can't be," she said in a whisper, "it can't, it can't be." But when the spasm had passed she got up shakily and went into the hall, where she stood irresolutely in front of the telephone, fingering the piece of paper which Aggie had given her, dreading the effort of speaking into the high wall instrument and holding up her arms.

There was an abrupt knock at the front door, and the sound of letters being pushed through the flap and falling into the wire basket. She

turned from the telephone with relief, glad of an excuse to put off decisive action. After all, if she were wrong—as of course she must be—it would be humiliating to have interrupted the meeting and fetched Edward home for nothing. “Don’t fuss so, darling,” she could hear him saying; “it’s nothing to be alarmed about.” Better perhaps to see if the pain returned, for then, if it did not, she would still have the satisfaction of pathos and reproach when he came home, would be able to tell him how ill she had felt all evening, how ill and frightened.

She took the letters out of the basket and examined them; most of them were for Edward; two only, addressed in unfamiliar writing, were for herself. She took them slowly into the drawing room and sat down by the French window, where there was still some light. The first was written on cheap lined paper in an untidy hand, and at first the signature conveyed no impression on her memory.

“Dear Madam,” she read. “You will be surprised at hearing from me after all these years, but I have wrote to Mrs. Shardiloe who is suited but as kindly given me your address. I have had bad times lately as my husband had a accident on the railway and there is no widows pension has God forgive them they proved Negligence. My boy is earning now but not enough and he lives in at the shop so I am at liberty and shall have to do something for myself. Mrs. S. kindly told me as you might be needing someone and I can come from Norwich any day now. I hope the dear little Baby has arrived all right and that you are as well Madam as can be expected.

“Hoping for an early reply,

“Yours respectfully,

“Mrs. Appleyard. (Bessie).”

Emma read the letter a second time and thoughtfully tapped her teeth. It was worth considering. How old would Bessie be nowadays? Forty, perhaps. A steady age. And she had always been a capable servant. She turned to the second letter, puzzled by something familiar in the narrow writing. It was a short note, written with many flourishes, and at the sight of Dawes’s signature she frowned, though with a quickening of interest.

“Dear Mrs. Massingham,” he had written, “I had the good fortune to meet Mrs. Shardiloe last week on my return from the U.S.A., and she was good enough to furnish me with your address. I hope you are well, and will accept my good wishes in remembrance of happy past

times. I am inaugurating a regular weekly circle on Wednesday evenings at eight p.m. at the above address and would be delighted to see you at any time. I need hardly say how much we should all appreciate the co-operation of so valued a sitter as yourself. Miss Fairey has already promised to be of our number, and expressed a fear that you were no longer interested in our work. I feel sure that this cannot be true.

“With best regards,

“Yours truly,

“W. G. Dawes.”

“Well!” said Emma to herself. “Well I never. How very extraordinary.” Yet on second thoughts it was just what one might have expected; at the very moment when he was more alive in her thoughts than he had been for five years past, he chose to present himself. A coincidence, of course, since he had obviously written the letter the day before, and only because he had happened to encounter her mother; but it was a disturbing one, the sort of coincidence for which he appeared to possess a significant gift. Emma reread the letter slowly, holding the paper sideways in the failing light, then let her hand fall absently on her knee, rejecting and then considering the hidden suggestion.

For there was obviously more suggested than he had chosen to say. Behind the noncommittal words lay more than invitation, there was the hint of an appeal; and equally obviously, of course, she would not go. Yet would it be so bad a thing to revive a little of that old life which had been so peculiarly her own? Not seriously, of course; not in the old way, but as a make-weight of importance to set in the scale against those many activities of Edward’s of which she was jealous: his patients and meetings, his speeches and political friends, the societies for this and that to which he unshakably attached such incomprehensible importance, which ate up his leisure and constantly took him away from her. In her year and a half of marriage she had found much in Edward that was difficult to understand. She would have said that her own life was full, but his was crowded, and it was a crowding in which his marriage had made little difference. His growing practice, the patients who were always sitting in ones and twos on the dining-room chairs, absorbed the better part of the day, and his leisure was canceled out by his different enthusiasms. They were not always

the same—indeed, his chopping and changing struck her as rather childish, the futile and time-wasting experiments of a younger mind. Only to his Fabians, his debates and meetings and committees did he remain constant; the rest of his energy was dissipated in what seemed a multiplicity of trivial things. Everything interested him: there was nothing that he could quite persuade himself to leave alone. It was as though he were somehow jealous of all experience, and could never leave any facet of his considerable talent unexplored. The sketchbook which she had seen lying long ago on Miss Dermot's doorstep was a token of only one of his amateur inquiries. Had he some hidden talent as a painter? There was no knowing until he tried; and from time to time his delight in visual impressions, his puzzled conviction that somewhere concealed in him lay the artist's eye, would drive him to spend unprofitable hours with pencil and brush, these in turn leading to problems of proportion and perspective, to theories of the psychology of color, to an avid study of the structure of the physical eye. He read enormously, sitting whole evenings often without speaking a word, pursuing some random hare which a chance interest had started, shocked to discover that he knew so little about the workings of borough councils, about different schools of philosophy, or the movements of the stars. Convinced that he would save time by using it he had bought a typewriter, and the mere sight of it, black and ugly in its mackintosh cover, had incited him to write articles for medical and political journals which, to Emma's annoyance, rarely accepted his work, or if they did, never paid for it. This troubled Edward less than it did her, for the articles started a train of thought too tempting to be ignored. Had he not always wanted to be a writer? Medicine and politics, it is true, were his chief interests, but what of those thoughts, memories, impressions crowding his mind, those striking situations and theories demanding expression, those glimpses of character haunting his imagination and fretting for a voice? Nothing would do but he must spend his evenings, alone in the surgery because of the rattle of the machine, attempting this craft which must surely, since he was literate and imaginative, be within his reach, littering the desk and filling the wastepaper basket with his experiments.

From time to time, disgusted with what he called his incurable frivolity, he would reproach himself with his inability to let well alone and attend to his serious business, and for a brief space would comfort his conscience with extra consulting hours for his poorer patients, and a

determined attack on his accumulated medical journals. Emma reaped little benefit from these sterner periods, for they gave her not more but rather less of his company, and left her to fret over her apparent failure to hold attention. Yet she had nothing concrete to complain of; he was always affectionate, kind, solicitous, never noticeably different from the already absorbed young man who had fallen in love with her. Her disappointment lay in the realization that she was a part of his life, not he of hers—an important part, it is true, one that he loved and was quite unconscious of neglecting—whereas the role that she had designed for herself in marriage had been far different. On those few occasions when she had complained of loneliness or boredom he had been concerned, surprised; had urged her to make friends and to go out more, or to make one more attempt to share his political interests. But none of these drab suggestions struck any spark of response, since Emma's needs were purely personal and narrow, and the notion of wasting time on abstract questions which could never concern her was incomprehensible. She had her mother's blood in her, warmed only by applause, and the breaking of new intellectual ground or the contenting pattern of suburban life was equally beyond her.

Welcomed as a means of focusing attention, pregnancy had at first appeared a heaven-sent diversion, and she had taken a delighted interest in her own condition. She had felt better in health for the first few months than she had ever done, and at the same time had enjoyed the perquisites of the invalid. But here, too, Edward had fallen below expectation. He had taken pains to assure her that invalidism was a mistake, and for her own sake had discouraged any tendency to pampering, cheerfully insisting on normality in a way that disheartened her. Only in looking forward to the child did he show the flattering eagerness which she desired, and she had to console herself with the thought of the added consequence she was bound to enjoy when she had become a mother. For, of course, the baby would be no ordinary child. He would be Edward's son, heir to innumerable possibilities; infinitely better worth producing than Lily's daughter. She would never take him to Brighton as her mother had suggested, or if she did, only on the rarest occasions and to inspire envy. She and Edward would go to Ireland, traveling first class, and her child should enjoy the advantages of Scatterry Castle. She sat on by the open window, absorbed in her musing, the letters in her lap and her eyes on the darkening garden.

An hour later, undressing for bed, she was gripped by an agony

which made her cry out unguardedly and clutch at the bedstead. Terrified, she had sank to her knees, dragging the eiderdown with her, and buried her altered face in its shiny surface. The pain lasted for several minutes, determined and uncontrollable, seizing her vitals with an alien and wrenching grip which her desperate crouching did nothing to relieve, and which relaxed only when it had completed its mysterious cycle and left her spent and sweating, her forehead pressed in weariness against the coverlet.

As soon as she dared she crawled to her feet and crossed the room, holding onto the furniture as she went, and rang the bell. It was bewildering that the pain could die away with such a sudden completeness, leaving her safe and trembling, but with her last doubt gone. So it had come at last, this horror that she had been dreading in secret; and the first taste of it had swept away any confidence that Edward had given her; it was her mother's hinted nightmare that she had got to endure; and she was facing it alone.

Aggie knocked modestly at the door and put her head round it, then came in quickly, looking frightened, when she had seen Emma's face.

"Aggie, telephone the doctor quickly at Mr. Edleston's. It's started. Please be quick. I left the paper with the number on the hall table."

"Yes, madam. Are you all right, madam? Can I fetch you anything?"

"No, no. Only for goodness' sake be quick. And Aggie! When you've done that, ring up Dr. Holland's house and tell him it's started. Tell them to get hold of the nurse as quickly as possible."

"Yes, madam. Only I'm not quite sure how to get the exchange. Do I turn that handle?"

"Yes, of course! Oh Aggie, you must have seen the doctor or me do it a thousand times! Use your wits if you've got any. And then come back here at once. I can't be left."

Aggie vanished abruptly and Emma sat down at the dressing table, snatching hurriedly at the ribbons of her camisole. Under the hard electric light her face looked out from the mirror, haggard and unattractive and full of fear. She stared at herself with a shrinking fascination as she pulled the pins out of her hair, kicking off her shoes as she did so in the desperate conviction that there was scarcely a moment to lose. "If I can only be in bed before it comes again," she thought, "I may be able to bear it."

She finished undressing hurriedly and put on her nightgown and

slippers, listening all the time for Aggie's return. How slow she was! And heaven alone knew how long it would take Edward to get home, even supposing the cab had started already.

As she got up from her chair she caught sight of the two envelopes, thrown down among the combs and brushes when she first came upstairs; she paused, steadying herself against the edge of the table. Well, obviously there was no time to think about them now. Bessie could be dealt with when it was all over, and as for Dawes, probably she would never bother to answer at all. Still, it was unwise, perhaps, to leave his letter about. She picked it up and looked at it uncertainly, then put it quickly in her handkerchief drawer, under the white-paper lining. She wouldn't have to make any decision for a month or two, probably not even then. All the same, it was better not to leave it about for anyone to read. She closed the drawer sharply and made her way to the bed, thankful for the sight of Aggie's anxious face and the comfort of a hot-water bottle.

That was on the Thursday. On Saturday morning at five o'clock the nurse went down to the kitchen to make herself some tea, and was pleasantly surprised to find Aggie down and already boiling a kettle.

"Well, you *are* an early bird," she observed tartly. "Making a cup of tea, are you? Lucky, that's just what I came down for." She took off her cuffs and sat down at the kitchen table.

"I don't come down as early as this as a rule," said Aggie, turning up the gas under the kettle. "But I couldn't sleep, so I thought I might as well."

"You've had more sleep than anybody else in this house, anyhow," said the nurse. "I haven't had the clothes off my back for two nights, nor Dr. Massingham either. He won't be sorry it's over, poor man, though it's not what he expected. Dr. Holland was saying to me only an hour ago ——"

"It *is* over, then?" Aggie paused with the scoop suspended over the tea caddy, her face full of pleasure. "Well I never! Why on earth didn't you say so? Is it a boy?" The nurse hesitated, her sharp eyes on the teapot.

"It is," she said.

"Oh, my word! Well, I *am* glad! What luck!" She put down the tin caddy with an exuberant clatter.

"Be quiet, will you? The child didn't live. Never breathed, not once. We've been working these past two hours. I could have told them it was hopeless." The nurse took off her *pince-nez* with a weary gesture and pinched the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger, closing her eyes. Drawing near in dismay, Aggie saw the heavy lines of fatigue settling in her face, and was at a loss how to answer.

"Oh," she said at last, her voice flat with disappointment. "Oh. Well. 'Ow was I to know? Oh dear, that *is* a pity. Is she very bad?"

"No," said the nurse. "I wish you'd make that tea; I've got to go back in a minute. No, she's not as bad as she might be; nothing like, considering how long it's took. She didn't make it any easier, either, I can tell you. She's not the type to take things easy. Dr. Holland had ever such a job with her. It'd have been over much earlier, in my opinion, if he hadn't been so soft. She wouldn't have had all that chloroform if she'd been in a hospital, you take it from me. It's a waste of time, really."

She drank her tea slowly, in precise sips, and Aggie's fascinated gaze fastened on the convulsion of swallowing that went on behind her collar.

"What'll they do with the little baby?" she asked presently in a whisper.

"That? Oh, the doctor will take it away. The mother hasn't even seen it, you know. I don't think they'll let her."

"I think that's ever such a shame. Not even a funeral, d'you mean? Well, I shouldn't like that. And all those lovely little clothes she'd made! It'll break her heart, won't it?"

"Not if she's got any sense it won't," said the nurse. "They're both young, aren't they? There's plenty of time. You'd be surprised how quickly most people manage to get over it." She wiped her lips with a clean folded handkerchief and polished her glasses. "Well, I mustn't sit here any longer, I suppose, glad as I am to get off my feet for a minute. You'd better take some tea into the dining room for Dr. Holland. I dare say he could do with it. And thank you for mine, by the way; it was very nice."

She got up reluctantly and went off with a rubber-soled tread, closing the door noiselessly behind her; and Aggie, subdued and at the same time impressed by the calamity, stole about the kitchen on tiptoe, exclaiming under her breath when she made the teacups rattle, or when the poker refused to rake the cinders silently. She was glad in a way

that she was not staying much longer in the house; a dear little baby was one thing, but a death was another, and already the thought of it lay like a weight on her spirits. She must be careful not to sing in the house, nor answer too cheerfully, and it was difficult for anyone so young and so happy to observe the decencies of sorrow.

"Though I'm ever so upset," she said to herself, licking the laundry-book pencil and crossing another day off the big grocer's almanac on the end of the dresser and counting to see how many squares stood between her and the day of her wedding, "I am, really." Indeed, she was moved to a moment of melting pity when she saw Dr. Massingham, looking a little odd without his tie and spectacles, strolling forlornly out in the dewy garden.

Chapter IX

(1913)

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THE CHILL OF A WINTER'S MORNING STOLE INTO THE drawing room as Bessie drew back the curtains and opened a crack in the French windows, grimacing at the sharp inrush of cold air. It was still dark; she could barely distinguish the path and the bulk of the tool shed, and after staring abstractedly for a moment into the garden she went back to the door and switched on the electric light, then spread an old dust-sheet over the hearthrug and laboriously sank to her knees before the grate. She worked slowly and methodically, with little grunts of effort as she shoveled the ash, creaking and breathing audibly over the black-leading. It was a nice grate to do, a rewarding grate; its rounded bars took a polish that you could see your face in and the little pink tiles of the hearth wiped up as clean as anything; but these winter mornings were cruel, there was no getting away from it; and Bessie's powerful hands were numb as she laid the sticks and carefully chose pieces of a medium size out of the coal bucket.

That done she carried the ashes, brush and shovel into the hall, folded her hearth-cloth, and with a slow precision which never varied set about her dusting. At the mantelpiece she paused to study the clock, and sighed with impatience. Only half-past seven. Well, she was nicely forward with her work, and that was something; but it would be hours before Mrs. Massingham was awake and ready to hear the adventure which she had to communicate. For one wild moment she contemplated breaking the news when she took up the doctor's tea, but dismissed the idea as unpractical, since at eight o'clock Mrs. Massingham was rarely awake and never in the best of tempers. Besides, a revelation of this sort required privacy and leisure; briefly sketched out at the bedside it would lose its impact; there would be no chance for the drama of astonishment, no hope of discussion. Bessie at fifty, a little battered and slowed down by life it is true, had lost none of

her early taste for wonder and catastrophe, and had been quick to realize that last night's encounter made a story of no common order, a full-blooded drama such as came one's way perhaps no more than once. "As good as a play, 'm, it was really," she whispered, unconsciously rehearsing, "you could ha' knocked me down with a feather. . . ."

The drawing room finished and the doctor's breakfast laid, she pottered back to the kitchen to get her own. Her breakfast never varied, three cups of strong tea and two slices of bread and butter, generally eaten standing up while she watched the clock and fried the dining-room bacon. The habit of standing to her breakfast was an old one, formed in the early days of marriage, when Mr. Appleyard had had to get off in good time to the station, and strengthened when there had been a boy to feed as well and hurry off to school. She would loom over them at the kitchen table as they ate, Mr. Appleyard in his porter's sleeved waistcoat and carpet slippers, his silver watch on the table before him, and the boy in his cap and muffler, gulping down tea and bread. It was owing to her menacing watchfulness that her husband, a leisurely conversationalist, had never been late at the station in all the years of his work, and that the boy had brought home several illuminated cards awarded for punctuality and attendance. Bessie had been proud of these records, and nursed a conviction that Tom Appleyard would have been alive to that day if only she had been at hand to stop him from dawdling. This was most probably true, for death had overtaken Mr. Appleyard in a manner incomprehensible to Bessie. "Where were his eyes?" she often said in relating the tragedy. "What I want to know is, why didn't he *hear* nothing?" For the shameful fact was that Mr. Appleyard had been killed at a level crossing on a long straight stretch of main line and in broad daylight. He came home that way every evening of his life at seven o'clock, and knew the times of the trains, as the stationmaster said, as well as his own name. But on this occasion his sociable nature, which was one of his charms, had proved his undoing, for as he had been going over the crossing, his tea can in his hand and his coat over his arm, a high trap driven by a groom had come through the opposite gate, and the groom being a friend of his Mr. Appleyard had stopped in the middle of the main line to pass the time of day. So deeply engrossed had they been, Mr. Appleyard leaning with his elbows on the wheel of the trap and the groom bending

over, that the up train from Norwich had whistled twice before they were aware of danger; and it was the groom's sudden snatching at the reins and the horse's plunging forward that had thrown Mr. Appleyard off his balance, leaving him scrambling up from the rails while the trap bounced to safety and the London express screamed by in an agony of braking. It had, of course, been child's play for the company to prove negligence, and Bessie had been widowed without the dignity of a pension; without, too (and this had been very nearly as hard to bear), the comfort of a funeral, since what had afterwards been traced of Mr. Appleyard had been too trivial to bury.

Bessie stirred her tea and sighed, remembering, as she usually did over her lonely breakfast, the pleasures of the past. For her marriage had been both comfortable and kind, rich with the domestic flavors that her soul enjoyed. They had been poor, of course, for the pay of a railway porter had been far from riches, but they had had a nice cottage in a respectable row, and Bessie had done her best to make them snug. They had even enjoyed some relative luxury, for she was a good cook, and Mr. Appleyard, who never wasted his money at the public house, had made homemade wines his personal specialty. Some of the pleasantest hours she could remember had been spent in strolling with Tom along the railway embankment, long Sunday afternoons in spring and late summer, picking nettles and cowslips, blackberries and elderberries, for his homemade brews; and afterwards he would be busy with casks in the back yard, weighing sugar and fruit in the kitchen and carrying out gallons of water. He had built himself a double-ended shed in the yard, in the near half of which the wine was set to ferment. The other part of the shed was inhabited by pigeons, and the sour yeasty smell of fermentation and the melodious rolling note of the pouters on their side of the partition was a double memory which Bessie would always carry.

The hall clock struck half-past eight as Bessie clapped a tin cover over the doctor's bacon and eggs and carried the tray into the dining room. There was no need to listen for his foot on the stairs: he would be down already, getting the morning's post from the letter box and unfolding his paper. His punctuality was a characteristic which Bessie found endearing. It imposed an exacting standard, but that standard was her own; you knew where you were with a gentleman who came down on the dot. It was different indeed with the mistress. She got up at all hours and sometimes stayed in bed until lunch-time, smoking

and reading; but in her case Bessie's admiration forestalled criticism; you could not expect conventional habits in a lady like Mrs. Masingham.

Edward looked up from his paper as she carried in the tray, and his pleasant smile (a thing which not every gentleman could manage so early) tempted her to break her news there and then, to try out the story while he ate his breakfast, as a sort of preliminary run-through of the full-dress recitation which would come later; but an instinct of loyalty to Emma made her hold her tongue, as well as a suspicion that, offered to the doctor over bacon and eggs and *The Times*, the story might somehow fail to achieve its climax.

"Good morning, Bessie."

"Good morning, sir. Nasty morning, i'nt it?"

"A beast of a morning. Thank God for a hot breakfast, anyhow. Couldn't face this weather without it."

"No, sir. I should think not, sir." She uncovered his plate and lingered to appreciate the comforting spectacle of a man with an appetite. "Shall you be in to supper this evening, sir? I rather think the mistress is expecting company, but it won't be till late, I dare say. I could give you something before' and."

"Oh. Well. I rather forgot that. Who is it coming?"

"Just the usual, I think sir. They won't be 'ere to a meal, any'ow. I could easy toss you up something."

"Oh no, don't bother, Bessie. I can just as easily be out."

"It's no trouble, sir. You could 'ave a fire in 'ere too, like you done before. It'd be quite nice."

Edward frowned.

"No, on second thoughts I really won't. I've got a busy day in front of me; there's a lot I can do. I don't suppose I should be able to get home in any case."

"Very well, sir. Just as you like, of course. Shall I tell the mistress you'll be out, then?"

"You needn't tell her anything," said Edward, opening his newspaper, "she won't expect me."

"I'll tell 'er all the same," said Bessie, grieved by the thought that the doctor might be hurt, or feel neglected. "She'll like to know. She's sure to ask me, sir, when I take up 'er breakfast."

Edward said nothing to this, so after moving the marmalade within his reach and advancing the toast rack Bessie withdrew, closing the

door respectfully behind her. She liked the doctor and in an obscure way felt sorry for him. Still, it was his own fault if he was so little at home: one could even look at it the other way, and say that he neglected Mrs. Massingham. She had never heard of another doctor in his position, for instance, who did not conduct his practice from his own home. It was a nice house, and quiet; much nicer, one would have thought, for the lady patients. And it was not as though he were a West-end doctor, who had to have a Harley Street address; a consulting room less than a mile away, on the other side of Muswell Hill, with the expense of an extra telephone and a young lady secretary, was, to Bessie's way of thinking, a quite disgraceful extravagance, and the convenience to his patients of being near the station could never justify it. The rent itself, Bessie calculated, let alone the young lady's wages, would keep a poor family in comfort. There was no accounting for the manner in which folk threw away their money.

Brooding on the wickedness of waste, she fetched the carpet sweeper and housemaid's box and proceeded to open the room that had once been the surgery. Bessie still thought of it as the surgery, for that had been its function when she first came to Grasmere Avenue and for a long time afterwards; but three or four years ago, when the doctor had removed his work and his brass plate to a separate address, the room had passed entirely into Emma's possession, and undergone a change; a change which Bessie, though she regretted the doctor, privately thought a very nice improvement. Mrs. Massingham now called it the séance room, and it was here, once or twice a week, that she held her evening circle; here, too, she saw the ladies who often came in the afternoon for private sessions. At odd times it was used for more prosaic purposes, as when Mrs. Bletchley the little dressmaker came, and the hall table and the sewing machine were moved in for a several days' hiatus of alterations and fittings, causing Bessie much annoyance because of the pins and cottons on the carpet.

This carpet was the object of her admiration, a dark purplish red with a rich pile, luxuriously fitted right to the edge of the wainscot. The heavy plush curtains, which had once belonged in the dining room, had been dyed to match, and gave the room an air of somber splendor. The fireplace was never used, and was concealed by a large fire screen of Japanese embroidery; the room was warmed by a hot-water radiator which Mrs. Massingham had installed. A medium's cabinet had been constructed in one corner with another pair of cur-

tains, but this was chiefly for ornament and the curtains were drawn back, framing an enormous Japanese jar of dried bullrushes. In summer Mrs. Massingham was particular to keep fresh flowers in the room, and in winter their place was filled with artificial roses, a vase of which now stood in the center of the table. Bessie admired these very much, and rearranged them a little in their vase and blew on them lovingly. She dusted the room with care, polishing the table and the straight-backed chairs, noiselessly flicking the keys of the upright piano and wiping out the big horn of the gramophone. There were only two pictures in the room, and she stood on tiptoe to apply her duster to the glass. The one over the mantelpiece, the head of an Indian brave executed in dim crayons, she did not care for, though, being Mrs. Massingham's work, she thought it clever; her real admiration was reserved for a large engraving which represented the happy phenomenon of death, depicting a kindly male angel with magnificent wings assisting a barefoot but otherwise well-draped female figure in an upward flight through increasingly luminous regions. Bessie loved this picture, for though it was hard to imagine Mr. Appleyard in this situation, it was somehow comforting. It as good as proved (since there it was in black and white) that what one believed was true, and even if it were only an artist's view of the matter it was a very nice way to think of the approach to heaven.

Rubbing up the leather armchair in which Mrs. Massingham habitually sat, Bessie's fingers, conscientiously exploring the cracks, encountered something which at first touch she thought was a handkerchief, but which on examination proved to be a screwed-up ball of cheesecloth, ragged and rather dirty. Bessie smoothed it out and folded it and put it in her apron pocket, making a mental note to deliver it to her mistress when she took up her breakfast. It was not often that Bessie found anything of the kind, but when she did she knew very well what she had to do with it. She had a religious fear of these mysteries and asked no questions; had she not known Mrs. Massingham from childhood, and had the perfect evidence of her own senses to convince her? She would have thought it risky to dabble in such things, perhaps, if the results had not been so deeply comforting and respectable. Several times in the last nine years there had been messages from her husband, consoling little sentences about intimate affairs, telling her to forgive the shabby behavior of their son, or try an infusion of celery seed for her rheumatism, and

her gratitude for these dispensations had strengthened her loyalty. It is doubtful, even if she had been capable of suspicion, whether she would have betrayed it; the evening sessions were entirely Mrs. Massingham's affair, and anything found after them was naturally conveyed to her and not to the doctor; though indeed, as Bessie knew, he would have shown no interest, since he took no part in the activities of the séance room and even on other occasions never went near it.

Having finished her dusting Bessie fetched her sweeper from the hall and paid her daily homage to the plum-colored carpet. She rolled out the footmarks of the preceding evening and went round the corners carefully, scouting for dust. One of the paper roses, she saw, had shed a petal, and knowing the limitations of the carpet sweeper she picked it up laboriously in finger and thumb. The tenderness of its texture surprised her, and holding it up to the light she saw that it was not a paper petal at all, but a real one, crumpled and blackened at the edges but still velvety and sweet. A damask rose, in November? She smelt it and closed her eyes, remembering Norfolk. The spirits, she knew, sometimes dropped strange and delicate tributes upon the magic circle; they were especially fond of flowers, Mrs. Massingham had told her. Might this be something of the kind, perhaps, a little unnoticed relic from the previous evening? In any case, Mrs. Massingham would hardly expect to have it returned to her; nobody would miss a little thing like that; nobody would grudge it. After some hesitation she hid it quickly in the other pocket of her apron. It would press ever so nicely between the pages of her prayer book.

Emma did not stir when she heard the tinkle of the breakfast tray, but lay with eyes closed, hugging her delicious warmth, while Bessie drew the curtains and closed the window, and brought her jacket and boudoir cap to the bedside.

"It's 'alf-past nine, 'm," said Bessie softly, "and I've brought you ever such a nice breakfast."

"Oh, Bessie, it is really?" Emma sat up with a groan and extended her arms for the jacket, which Bessie arranged and buttoned. Then she put on the lace boudoir cap with sleepy fingers, pushing her soft dark hair away under its absurd flaps and ribbons. Bessie poured out a cup of tea and uncovered the grilled kidneys.

"Oh dear, I wonder if I can eat that? I'm afraid I've got a headache,

Bessie. Will you get me some aspirin? I hope to goodness it isn't going to be one of my bad ones."

"Oh, I do 'ope not, 'm. Whatever will you do tonight? You must take it easy, that's my advice. You eat your breakfast and go to sleep again. That was what worked last time."

"Yes, I suppose I'd better. What a nuisance; I've got so much to do." She drank her tea slowly, wrapping her fingers round the cup, while Bessie rummaged for the aspirin bottle.

"'Ere you are, 'm; I should take two or three if I was you. You want to feel really tiptop for this evening."

She swallowed the tablets with a grimace while Bessie watched her, anxiously hoping that her mistress would soon feel well enough to listen.

"If I could 'ave a word with you, 'm?" she began doubtfully.

"Oh, Bessie, what is it? Is it really important? I truly don't feel like attending to anything just yet."

"No, 'm. Only something 'appened last night that I wanted to ask you about. Very queer it was; I don't know what to think."

"Oh?" Emma began to crunch her toast, shaking open the newspaper with her free hand. She knew Bessie's stories of old and hated having to listen to them in the morning.

"Well, it was like this, 'm. Yesterday being my 'alf day I went to see my friend Mabel; you know, the one who lives at Stockwell."

Emma looked up with a determined smile, suddenly resolved not to undergo Bessie's friend Mabel at the same time as a headache.

"*Dear* Bessie, should you mind telling me about it later? My head's simply splitting, and look, I've got all these letters to go through, and some important telephoning to do before ten o'clock. I'd much rather hear about it presently, when I'm up."

"Very well, 'm," said Bessie sadly, "only it was so very queer, I did think . . ."

"Yes, well, I shall love to hear about it presently. I'll ring when I'm down, and then perhaps we can have a cup of tea together." With a dismissing air she slit open the first of her letters.

"Yes, 'm." Bessie turned to go, consoled by this unexpected promise of a better opportunity. "Oh, and if you please, 'm, there's this." She took the little pad of cheesecloth from her pocket and laid it on the bed. "Down the side of your chair it was, 'm; in the surgery."

Emma glanced at the little object quickly, but let it lie. "Oh yes,

that's right. Thank you, Bessie; very kind of you. I know you'll make the room look specially nice for tonight." She gave Bessie an affectionate smile and turned back to her letters, waiting until the door had closed behind her before stuffing the rag rather crossly under her pillow.

She ran through the letters quickly, separating them methodically as she read—tradesmen's bills, one or two receipts, a note from her mother reminding her of the approach of Christmas (" . . . you know I can't get up to London, dear, but I want to get you something and a few suggestions would help . . .") and three or four letters in which the writers addressed her as Mrs. Shardiloe. "Dear Mrs. Shardiloe," ran one, "I should very much like to come to one of your circles in the near future. Would you be kind enough to let me know the usual fee? I am writing on the recommendation of Mr. W. G. Dawes." This letter was signed "(Mrs.) Ethel Watson," a name she did not know. The address, she noted with pleasure, was a good one, and she put it carefully aside. Another, from an established sitter, asked for a private appointment; a third, anonymous and black with underlinings, uttered a stern warning about the Witch of Endor and the Day of Judgment; a fourth, written on the notepaper of the North Kensington Psychical Research Society, asked her if she would receive a representative on any day convenient to herself. This, after some consideration, she laid on the top of the pile, then turned her attention to the newspaper while she finished her breakfast. There was nothing of interest in it—a lot of dull stuff about Ireland, which she quickly passed over as the sort of thing that Edward would read and which always seemed the same, more about that dreadful Mrs. Pankhurst, which she also skipped (it had been interesting when a suffragette had thrown herself under the King's horse that summer, but one couldn't go on reading about them forever) and, thank goodness, a new murder. She read two columns with attention, disappointed to find that the case promised nothing sensational. There hadn't been a really good crime for ever so long; she doubted whether there would ever be anything so exciting again as Dr. Crippen. The very name still sent a shiver down her spine, even after three years. It had been a splendid murder.

She threw away the paper and dozed uncomfortably over her tray for a time; then, deciding that her headache had taken a turn for the better, pushed the tray aside and worked her way to Edward's side

of the bed, where she could reach the telephone. It was a tall, heavy instrument, difficult to handle: she arranged herself comfortably on one elbow before lifting the receiver.

"That you, Walter? This is Emma Shardiloe speaking. Well, no, I'm not feeling my best, I've got rather a headache. Oh, I expect it'll be all right by tonight. I hope so, anyhow. Look, about tonight: did you find out anything further about the son? You were going to try . . . oh, *diphtheria*, was it? What an extraordinary thing, I thought only children . . . Oh well, of course, he wasn't very old. I know all about diphtheria; you choke, don't you, and have a silver tube or something? Well, that's most helpful. I think I've got everything else. Oh, I know what I wanted to ask you. Who's this Mrs. . . . Mrs. . . ."—she fumbled anxiously among her letters—"ah, here it is: Mrs. Watson. Is she really somebody you know? Oh, I see; well, that's very nice of you. You might bring her some time next week, perhaps, after I've seen you again. But what's all this about a fee? She said in her letter . . . I mean, I hope you haven't been giving her a wrong impression? Oh well, I can clear that up when I see her, I expect. And then there's the something-or-other Psychical Research Society. North Kensington, that's it. They want to send somebody to see me. Is it all right? I've never had anything to do with that lot . . . Oh well, if you say so. Have you ever had any dealings with them? I don't much care for these enthusiastic amateurs. Still, if you say they're all right I suppose they must be. I won't make any arrangements without letting you know first." She balanced the telephone against her knees while Dawes's voice creaked in the receiver. "Oh, I don't think so," she said at last. "I've got an awful headache, you see; I really think I ought to save myself for tonight. I'd have loved to otherwise. Now, Walter, don't try and persuade me. No, no, you mustn't say such things. I won't listen. I'm a sick woman today, you must be very kind . . . That's right, I'll see you this evening. Mind you get Lady Thingummy in a good temper. Good-by!"

"By-by, dear," said Dawes's voice, surprisingly, in the receiver. Emma put down the telephone with a grimace.

Dawes was showing signs of becoming a problem. There had been nothing awkward, nothing you could precisely put your finger on—yet; but there were symptoms, slight yet unmistakable, that this apparently detached and unassailable man was becoming amorous. After all these years, too; it was almost disgusting. At the very least it was

inconvenient, and possibly dangerous, for she could not afford a rebuff; Dawes was too useful by far, and in possession of too many secrets; the goose who laid such desirable eggs was a privileged animal. Obviously he must be played, treated with flattering intimacy and at the same time kept at a distance, in the hope that sooner or later he would divert his attention. Yet even that was risky, for a love affair with anyone else would almost certainly take him away from her and put an end to her monopoly. It was all very exasperating and far from easy.

Dawes was no longer the mystery that he had once been. There were still sides of his nature that she could not plumb and motives still unexplained, but she had a shrewd idea of the lines on which his strategy had been planned since she had first known him, and his private life had long since ceased to be a secret. When she had first met him, and for years afterwards, he had seemed a creature wholly exempt from human weakness. Unmarried, serious, hard-working, he had appeared so self-contained and respectable as to be scarcely human. He had betrayed no interest in herself as a young woman, and though in the past she had been conscious of his curious attraction he had never shown by word or deed that this consciousness was mutual, and their association, intimate as it had been in other respects, had sometimes surprised even Emma by its unshakable decorum. "Mr. Dawes is an exceptionally steady man, a wonderful character," Mrs. Webster had said in the past, and Emma, though she guessed much to his disadvantage, had in the main agreed with this generous estimate. Even after her marriage and the death of her child, when in a kind of despair she had renewed their friendship and gone back to the strange partnership she had renounced, as she thought, forever, he had been for some years more the man she had always known—detached, cool, self-absorbed, sententious; a man of mystery, perhaps, but without passions. And then, about two years ago, Dawes had come to her in trouble, and for the first and only time had confided in her. For years, it then appeared, he had kept a mistress, a certain Mrs. Pearce whom Emma had never met and whose existence up to that time she had never suspected. It had been a relationship of nearly twenty years' standing, and except that they lived in different parts of Dulwich and that somewhere or other Mrs. Pearce had a mislaid husband, was as steady-going and respectable as any ordinary marriage. Prudence, one could but suppose, had kept it secret, since

the Websters would have reacted unfavorably to any hint of scandal, and in his unexceptionable character lay half the strength of his position. It is certain that he would never have confided the secret to Emma if Mrs. Pearce had not begun to suffer from a mysterious illness by which they were both frightened.

He never, indeed, fully explained Mrs. Pearce, though her position was clear enough once Emma had seen her, and at first asked her advice rather timidly, "on behalf of a friend." This friend, he said, was ill, and the doctor could make nothing of her; would Dr. Massingham, perhaps, be kind enough to see her? Emma had replied that of course he would be delighted, and had been surprised when Dawes had seemed ill at ease and had hedged a little; still more when he had asked her if she would visit Mrs. Pearce herself, first; there might, he said, conceivably be nothing the matter, and he would set great value on the opinion of another woman. Accordingly, prompted by curiosity as much as kindness, Emma had been taken to tea with Mrs. Pearce, and had walked straight into a suppressed chapter of Dawes's history.

Mrs. Pearce had lived alone in a crowded little house, had almost perfectly answered Emma's conception of a kept woman. She had evidently been pretty in her youth, and now was stout in a complacent, smoothed-skinned way that was not unbecoming. Her hair was still a rich reddish brown (dyed, perhaps?) and her cheeks were rouged to the pinkness of an Alexandra rose. She was carefully, almost opulently dressed, crooked her little finger as she drank, ate bread and butter with a fork, and spoke in a voice so crushingly genteel that one received the impression that she had tested and approved each uttered syllable. Yet in spite of these pretensions she had an air of pathos, for she was a sick and bewildered woman, disappointed with life and obsessed with the conviction that she would shortly die. She had suffered for some months from abdominal pain, and was worried by an increase in weight, which at first, she said, she had thought was merely middle age, but which now was beyond all reason. The doctor had been treating her for indigestion, but with no success, and now Walter was insisting on a second opinion.

Emma was flattered by being taken into their confidence, and seeing him in this anxious domestic relation to a woman of whom he was obviously fond and for whom she herself conceived a rather pitying sympathy, she found Dawes more humanly likeable than she had

done before, and felt that much that had baffled her was now explained. She had urged Mrs. Pearce to consult Edward, and when she had done so, and had been hurried with alarming promptness into hospital, Emma found herself, rather to her surprise, acting the part of intimate friend to both of them, visiting Mrs. Pearce with flowers after her operation and trying to allay Dawes's fears during the days that followed. This she could only do with very slight conviction, for Edward had told her privately that the thing had gone too far, and that the surgeon had done no more than an exploration; and indeed, Mrs. Pearce was dead before a week was out, and Emma was aghast at having a distracted Dawes on her hands for almost every moment until after the funeral. She wondered at the time—though she had not the heart to ask—why his professed beliefs stood him in no better stead at this time of separation; he had grieved for Mrs. Pearce as deeply as though she had gone forever out of reach, and it had been months before he could bring himself to mention her.

But that was now two years ago, and Dawes, being only human, had recovered. He was now in the circumspectly alert condition of a widower, tasting at the same time his loneliness and his freedom, hankering for something which would cure the one without threatening the other. His eye had fallen on Emma, by this time a handsome woman in her middle thirties, and had speculatively remained there. At first she had noticed nothing, save that he was even more helpful and flattering than before; but little by little, by a subtle increase in his attentiveness, by chance touching of hands and meeting of glances, by his begging her to use his Christian name and showing a fondness for her own, she had recognized with something of a shock the trend of his inclinations. It had been a surprise, and not a pleasant one, for in spite of the rubs and dissatisfactions of marriage nothing was further from her thoughts than an intrigue of this nature; her temperament in this respect was cool; and though he possessed an attraction of a curious kind Dawes was the last man to evoke any physical response in her. Her vanity might, perhaps, have led her into infidelity with a more prepossessing lover, provided there had been no danger of losing Edward; but to take a risk, against her inclinations, for a tedious respectable man in the late middle age—why, the idea was unthinkable.

So the whole thing was a nuisance, and of a nervous sort, for she depended too much on Dawes's good will to do as she often wished

and shake him off. He had gradually turned into an old man of the sea, more useful than Sinbad's companion, it is true, but threatening to become an equivalent burden.

To be honest, which was a feat she rarely managed, Emma had to admit it was to Dawes she owed her present privileged position. Nine years ago, fretful and at a loss after the death of her child, she had been encouraged by Edward to take up her old interests, since he was worried by her long dejection and apathy and nothing else seemed likely to hold her attention. He had made it plain since that he had regretted this advice, for the results of it had so reduced the sympathy between them that if Edward had been less tolerant and Emma less possessive they might have destroyed instead of merely undermining their marriage; but at the time it had seemed a plausible and even a wise suggestion, and Edward had been pleased to find it readily adopted and had himself looked forward with a certain skeptical interest to the experiment. Emma, however, though she snatched at the chance of retrieving her magic world, which, with all its difficulties, had at least been rich in drama and self-importance, was determined to have none of her husband's interference, and at first had contented herself with attending Dawes's circle as a privileged spectator, at the same time listening only halfheartedly to his persuasions. Dawes himself she had found but little changed; improved, if anything, by success and prosperity; more human and less secretive, readier to unbend. He was fairly well off, and very pleased with his prospects; Websters' was falling slowly but surely into his lap, and money had mellowed him. He was at this time more firmly entrenched than ever with Mrs. Webster, and had proved his powers by extending his outside influence. He had been holding a weekly circle of his own, to which, being no longer active, Mrs. Webster rarely came, but she had listened jealously to all reports of these meetings, and supported him all the more ardently as he increased his connection. He had still refused to accept money for what he termed his services to spiritualism, and Mrs. Webster had been quite hurt to discover that his grateful sitters were in the habit of forcing presents on him of one kind or another, and she had insisted on making him some return, on the strength of which he and Mrs. Pearce had enjoyed one holiday in Brussels and another in Venice. His visit to America, ostensibly to attend a spiritualist convention, had been a rewarding move, for not only did it give him a cachet among his London acquaintance and

bring him to the notice of several spiritualist papers, but it enriched his experience of the medium's trade and left him with the comfortable feeling that he belonged to a large and influential profession.

A little softened and vulgarized by success, he had been franker with Emma than in their early days, and, once she had agreed to re-enter the old partnership, had at last spoken quite openly about methods of fraud, though with a pious reservation concerning his beliefs. "These things console people," he would say, "they are a sort of working model of what we believe, and, I sincerely think, do a great deal of good. They create an atmosphere, Mrs. Massingham; they attune the mind, and prepare it to receive those psychic impressions which it is our object to study." This implication of genuineness behind the deceit had still puzzled Emma, and she was driven to the conclusion that he did, indeed, possess some rudimentary form of supernormal power. She was familiar with his methods and knew him to be in most respects a cheat; yet after all there remained a residue of conviction not to be explained away. She had herself heard him give evidence of private knowledge which had surprised his sitters, and which they had often declared no one possessed but themselves; and no amount of hints and questioning could produce a satisfactory clue. "I simply don't know," he would say in moments of candor. "These things just become known to me; I'm afraid I can't explain it more clearly than that. It was that gift, as you know, which first prompted my curiosity. The cornerstone, you might say, of all my work." Further than that he would not or perhaps could not go.

Emma had been at first a little jealous of this power, which won a grudging admission even from Edward. "There may be such a thing as telepathy," he had said, after the first experimental sittings in Grasmere Avenue, from which she had not been able to exclude him; "a number of sound people, apparently, think it possible; and if it *does* exist I should say this fellow Dawes to some degree possesses it. He'd be an interesting study if he weren't so overlaid with all this mumbo-jumbo that it's impossible to get at him. I suppose he may believe in some of it himself, but if you ask me, he's one-tenth an abnormal case and nine-tenths humbug." Emma, then only at the beginning of her long and painful struggle with her husband, had vigorously defended Dawes, rashly claiming she possessed this power herself. At the time she believed that she had gone too far, and had become hysterical over the failure of Edward's well-meaning experi-

ments; but as the months went by she came to believe that she had spoken no more than the truth, and that only pigheadedness made him refuse her recognition. By that time, however, Edward had been driven away from the subject by disgust of human credulity and more than a suspicion of herself, and her justifying self-persuasion came too late.

Emma had known from the first that it would be a mistake to admit Edward to any of the sittings, but it had been too difficult to dissuade him; impossible, indeed, without hurting his feelings and making her own integrity altogether suspect; for Edward, calm and amiable and resolutely open-minded, saw or pretended to see no argument against their sharing this puzzling and perhaps valuable experience; so that Emma, embarked under Dawes's aegis on a revival of her mediumship, had had no choice but to let him come to one or two deliberately abortive sessions. He had been, at first, extremely patient; too critical, perhaps, of séance conditions and inclined to smile at the naïve enthusiasm of the sitters; but on the whole amenable. But when nothing happened beyond a little trumpet whispering and a few raps he had grown privately impatient and soon openly scornful, amazed that Emma could lend herself to these childish performances. To Dawes himself he had proved immediately hostile and had done his best to convince Emma of the justice of his impression. "Why, the man *smells* of charlatanism," he had said; "I couldn't believe him if he produced twenty phantoms, here in my own surgery." "That's just why you're such a prejudiced witness," Emma had retorted; "you've made up your mind to be superior and you wouldn't admit a fact if it was proved under your nose."

"But I *do* admit a fact, and the fact seems plainly to be that Dawes is a cheat. I never thought from your description that he could be so plain a one, going through all the old jiggery-pokery that's been laughed at for years. How you can be taken in by him is what I can't understand. D'you really tell me that you think those raps and idiotic whispers weren't produced by perfectly ordinary means? Oh come, my dear; I give you credit for more intelligence."

"I won't discuss it with you," Emma had said at last. "You're determined to take that view of it—very well; you're entitled to your own opinion. But my opinion happens to be otherwise, and I'm not going to be shaken out of it to satisfy your prejudice. You believe in a lot of things that I think absurd—your Fabians and Votes for Women and societies for this, and that and the other—but I leave you

alone about it, don't I? I don't pour ridicule on these things because I privately think they're silly and a waste of time, and much as I should sometimes like to. It's no pleasure to me, I assure you, to see you spend every minute of your free time on things that I dislike, so that I see less of you even than your patients do, which is saying a good deal; but I don't interfere with it, do I? I don't nag. And I'll thank you not to criticize or nag me either."

"That's unfair," said Edward, "it's not a just comparison. I believe in these things, honestly and rationally, and because I believe in them I feel an obligation to do something about them."

"Exactly!" cried Emma triumphantly. "You couldn't have expressed my own feelings better. So now we understand one another, and can drop the subject."

"Ah, but we don't," said Edward, "and we can't drop it, dear, until we do. If you *do* believe in what goes on at this man's séances, and lend yourself to it in good faith, then I think you're grossly deceived, and I ought to do everything in my power to undeceive you. I shan't blame you—I shall be surprised, that's all, for his methods seem to me to be so utterly discreditable, and his whole manner a sham deliberately calculated to disarm criticism. If, on the other hand, you are not entirely convinced, either of his powers or your own—and there's a good case to be made out for yours being purely imaginative, you know—and yet, in spite of that, continue to encourage this man and impose a possible deception on others, well—" He broke off, looking helpless. "I just don't understand you, that's all. You must try and make your position clear to me, because I begin to think it's very important."

"I've made my position clear a thousand times. You willfully misunderstand me. I don't claim to possess superior knowledge or wonderful powers, but I think I have certain gifts, and I'm trying to acquire knowledge. It may not be in your line, but that's not a sufficient argument against it."

"I'm not advancing that argument, and well you know it. I'm only asking you to be explicit. I merely want you to tell me *what* powers you think you possess, *whether* you think Dawes an honest man or a fraud, and whether you're pursuing the subject as a vocation or a frivolous amusement."

"Since you don't believe in the existence of psychic powers," said Emma coolly, "there's not much point in discussing them with you,

or whether I possess them. I *know* that I'm psychically sensitive; I *don't* know yet to what extent. I'm simply trying to find out, and I think it unsympathetic and cruel to the last degree to try and brow-beat me out of it. As to Dawes, it's my opinion (which is at least as good as yours, and at all events isn't prejudiced) that he's an unusually powerful psychic, and that if he deceives himself at all, which I doubt, it's much less than you think. Your remark about frivolous amusement was in bad taste. One doesn't amuse oneself with the question of life after death. *You* may, perhaps, but I don't. Any power I possess doesn't make me any happier, I assure you. The strain of it makes me nervous and ill very often—though don't be afraid I shall expect any consideration on that account. All I ask is to be left alone, and not made unnecessarily miserable."

"Darling!" said Edward with exasperation, "God knows I only want to make you happy. I don't seem to, do I? That strikes me as rather sad, for I do love you, and you may be Joan of Arc for all I care, hearing voices and seeing visions, so long as you'll still be yourself sometimes, and not quarrel with me."

"I know perfectly well when you're sneering, so don't put on that reasonable and long-suffering expression. I shouldn't like to say how much it irritates me."

"I'm sorry," said Edward mildly. "We're getting quite nasty, aren't we? I'm surprised we should be so childish. We've got rather off the point of the argument, too, which seems to me, to put it briefly, that you're lending yourself—deliberately or unconsciously, I don't know—to what I'm sure is a cruel and stupid deception. Even supposing, my dear girl, that you and Mr. Dawes are as telepathic as anything, is it honest, is it wise, to support the belief that you're in touch with the spirit world, to create a fools' paradise for people like little Mrs. What's-her-name, and that pathetic Miss Fairey?"

"It's not a paradise," said Emma, "nor are they fools. However, I don't expect you to understand that. But even supposing that it were, supposing in the end we find we're wrong, and have given them a marvelous comfort by mistake, what harm does it do? It's made them happy, it's given them something to hope for and believe in. Life isn't all roses, believe me, and a lot of people are unhappier all the time than *you* could ever understand, let alone experience. Is it so dreadful if, in trying to find an explanation of things that puzzle us,

we accidentally make a few people happy, and give them a grain of comfort?"

"Yes," said Edward gently, "*it is* dreadful, and I believe I can tell you why. Any perversion of the truth is an immoral act, even though at the time it may create a pleasing delusion. Everybody makes mistakes, I know—the whole history of science is a record of trial and error—but it seems to me terribly wrong to propagate as a comforting gospel something that you are by no means sure is true; and you yourself said a moment ago that you might be mistaken. That's the whole grievance I have against orthodox religion: all sorts of exploded ideas continue to be taught—long after their teachers have had to make their own private reservations over the articles of belief—because, they say, they offer comfort and hope to humanity, or impose a desirable standard of conduct, and so on. They take no account of the fact that disillusion, when it comes, is far more destructive to the average mind than a complete lack of any comforting fallacies. By the time it comes, most people are too lazy and set in their ways to begin all over again; so they remain empty; minds that have had some pretty props struck from under them, generally too late to start building again on a more stable foundation.

"You said—didn't you?—that I hadn't the imagination to see that human life is largely unhappy. There you're wrong. I see it more clearly, perhaps, than a lot of people. That's why I spend so much time on attempts which you, in your ignorance, consider absurd, but which are all genuinely aimed, my dear, at improving the lot of human beings, and making life the happier thing it could be if more reasonably and responsibly planned. Such methods may seem dull to you; they are made up of all the things that you despise—committees and meetings and reports, and hard work, and education, and the long struggle to make people throw off the dead weights of false comfort and resignation and illusions, and use their own human faculties to remake their lives according to a happier pattern.

"I know; you're going to say that life wouldn't be worth living without its illusions. That's a very popular idea, I believe, though God knows how it ever started. Probably because self-induced illusions are so very cosy, and are a nice way of evading responsibility. If we can push all our misfortunes onto the shoulders of a benevolent Creator, who can be trusted to make things come all right in the end—if not in this world, then the next—it saves a lot of effort and hard thinking,

and the world can be left to muddle along as before. If, on the other hand, you believe that human beings are responsible creatures, or could be, responsible *for* themselves and *to* themselves—their own only hope, in fact—then they ought to pull themselves together and resolve to face the truth as far as we know it, and take a constructive hand in their own affairs; in fact, grow up finally.

“There are, after all, my dear, two ways of attacking a problem. It’s rather like having a muck-heap at your door—no, you needn’t make that face, it’s not such a bad description of any of the unpleasant facts of man’s existence; his poverty, his diseases, his cruelty, his unhappiness and ignorance, even the bleak fact that when this life’s over he’s had his only chance and there’s nothing left—and this muck-heap causes you a lot of disagreeable inconvenience, you don’t like going near it or looking at it and yet you can’t escape it. Well, what are you going to do? You can creep out at night and cover it with a nice cloth, so that none of it shows; and you can say that it’s something quite different from what you first suspected, something attractive and very comforting, which makes all the difference. And if anybody still notices the nasty smell, and wants to investigate, you can say ‘Oh no; this is all rather magic and extremely holy. Mustn’t touch! And the smell you mention is rather nice once one learns to appreciate it.’ Well, that method works well enough, I suppose, to suit some people. My own view is that it’s a bad one, and does more harm than good in the end, and isn’t the laborsaving device that you imagine it. The only effective method, to my way of thinking, would be to get a spade and a barrow and clear it all away; but examining it carefully, of course, as you did, so in case there were anything useful in it, as there usually is, which could be put to more practical purposes. You would want to do all this in a good light, naturally, and it might be a beastly job and take a lot of time and be infinitely discouraging; but you’d stand a good chance of getting it done in the end, and then you’d be the better for it.”

There was a long, rather constrained silence when Edward stopped speaking, and at the end of it Emma yawned elaborately.

“I’m afraid I’ve been boring you,” he said.

“I’m afraid you have, rather. I lost the thread when you started talking about muck-heaps, and as I felt sure you couldn’t be talking about spiritualism under that offensive allegory I stopped listening.”

"What a pity," said Edward quietly, with his disguising smile. "If only I knew some conjuring tricks I might have held your attention."

All this had happened several years ago, and to Emma, lazily brooding in bed over the problem of Dawes, it was no longer a matter of any particular importance, even in her memory. She had been right about Edward in the first place; it had been foolish ever to allow him over the threshold of the subject. He had, however, retreated rapidly enough, and for a long time had neither criticized nor interfered, leading his parallel life under the same roof, absorbed in his work and outside interests as of old, and meeting her with no perceptible change of kindness or affection on any mutual ground of safety. They had few friends in common, the fundamental division of their interests making such a group impossible, so that Edward's friends and acquaintances rarely came to his home, while Emma built up her own circle of believers and admirers. The division between them took an outward and visible form when Edward, unable any longer to conceal his repugnance for the activities which kept the drawing room darkened and crowded with devout visitors one evening a week and irritatingly locked against him while solitary ladies consulted Emma in the afternoons, and uneasy, too, for the reputation of his medical practice, announced his decision to move his consulting-room away from the house and his brass plate from the gate, for the sake, he said, of being a good deal nearer to the station. Emma had protested at the time, and had offered to resume her maiden name for what were now not far short of professional purposes; but Edward, without dilating on his real reasons, had proved obstinate, and the brass plate and the surgery furniture had been moved to the other side of Muswell Hill. There seemed no reason, once the move was accomplished, why Emma should not turn it to her own advantage, and accordingly after a decent interval she had converted the empty surgery to her own use, and, partly out of pique and partly as a liberating and romantic gesture, had re-created herself to her circle as Emma Shardiloe, leaving the less exacting role of doctor's wife to plain Mrs. Massingham.

Furnished with a new carpet, a gramophone and a hallowed atmosphere, the séance room, as it was now called, put a seal of importance on Emma's mediumship, and was generously praised by Dawes. It was exactly right, he said: plain, dignified, and at the same time im-

pressive; it would be nobody's fault if the best results were not obtained in such a setting. And the results, if one could judge by people's gratitude and her growing celebrity, had been very good indeed. The circle had had its ups and downs like any other; there had been one or two unpleasant incidents which had had to be smoothed over; but on the whole, with Dawes's help, and on the simplified lines which experience had proved the safest, she might fairly claim to be an established and successful medium. She had never attempted to revive the phenomenon of materialization. It was too difficult, too dangerous, and—well, also a little vulgar. All materializing mediums, Dawes now told her, were open to suspicion; they succeeded, generally speaking, only in very lax conditions; the thing was at once too crude and too ambitious, like spirit photography. No: if his experience in America had taught him anything, it was that the mental medium alone was genuine and respectable. There were plenty of others, of course, and some of them did well out of it; but the faking in America had reached such a ludicrous pitch that the whole movement was in danger of being discredited; even psychical research societies were growing skeptical, and it was better to dissociate oneself altogether from that class of practice. One might succeed in producing something, or one might not—a face, a hand, or merely a fragment of ectoplasm—but on the whole it was safer to be vague, not to attempt anything too human; it was the most delicate hints of the supernatural that carried conviction, and these were more than enough.

With these clumsier methods eliminated, what was left? Raps, voices, touches, draughts and ghostly movements were simple enough; so, too, on propitious occasions, were apparitions (a flower, a fragment of some semiprecious stone, a scarab bought from a shop near the British Museum, a damask rose dropped from the darkness in the middle of winter), but nine-tenths of the field, which was still a sufficiently rich one, was mental and intangible, and it was in this field that Emma, cautious at first and self-mistrustful, had at last discovered gifts which she could exercise with conviction.

There were certain things which the most hostile critic was not able to pin down, and it was on these that she built her faith and silenced her reason. First, the trance which had frightened her in childhood, and which she had alternately simulated and encouraged in the early days of her mediumship, now presented little difficulty; she could, by throwing herself into the right frame of mind and gazing at her

ring, her bracelet or any small bright object, induce a curious state between sleep and waking, in which she could both hear and speak, though rather as though she heard and spoke at a distance; and the images which presented themselves to her mind during this state, and the words she spoke, however deliberately, she now accepted without question as inspiration. It had been difficult to accept this interpretation at first, for her mind, though to a certain extent withdrawn, worked with perfect clearness, and she could remember and reproduce facts and details which she had acquired beforehand in a perfectly normal manner, generally through Dawes; but among these, other impressions would rise and engage her attention, and she would give them expression in a torrent of half-coherent words from which her sitters rarely failed to pick something of value. She had developed a great facility in imagining figures and scenes, and would throw them off in description as fast as they came, giving the impression of an unseen world crowding upon her, a host of departed spirits clamoring for a voice. She often in trance addressed them familiarly and with impatience. "Yes, yes—don't crowd me so—it's the little boy with brown hair who's trying to say something . . . yes, I know, but you confuse me, he's growing faint . . . why must you all speak together? . . . he has a message for his mother, he says . . . oh, but you make it so difficult!" And she would run on, murmuring and describing and exclaiming, dropping here a name and there a fragmentary message, blending what she already knew with all sorts of random impressions coursing in a rapid flow before her inward eye, a panorama so copious and varied that it was like an enormous spiritual lucky dip for the faithful: something for everybody.

This same method, a torrent of energetic and partly inconsequent speech in which question and suggestion threw out and then withdrew their subtle feelers, she employed with even greater success in her private sittings, those consultations which had once been held in the locked drawing room to Edward's annoyance, and to which only hand-picked clients, of whose needs and desires she knew enough for guidance, were admitted. On these occasions, sitting usually in a half-light, she would fall into trance with a few sighs and shivers, and then, speaking in one of the many voices in which she was now perfect, would assume the identity of one of her established spirit guides, and probe, inform, and experiment with her sitter until both satisfactorily arrived at the information they wanted. Her spirit guides were three:

the original Moon Flower, whom most of the sitters liked and who still came in useful; an eighteenth-century clergyman called Dr. Dodds, who had a quavering voice, some knowledge of medicine and a shrewd unecclesiastical humor; and an unknown young girl, Susannah Epworth, who had passed over, she said, at the beginning of the last century, and who was very good at giving uplifting advice and getting hold of deceased relatives. These sessions of private clairvoyance were cozy affairs, for Emma's personal charm as well as her looks had developed with maturity, and her manner was so intimate and compelling that the sitter as often as not fell under her spell during the confidential talk over afternoon tea which rounded off the visit, and drawn out by her skillful questions and flattered by sympathy, often betrayed more secrets than she was aware of. Emma advised with enthusiasm on affairs financial, domestic and of the heart, and rarely omitted to tell the pleased and astonished sitter that he or she was psychic. "I can see your aura quite distinctly," she would say, half closing her dark eyes and tilting back her head; "it's blue . . . blue . . . and luminous . . ." or green, or rosy, or golden as the case might be; and she would advise the sitter to try and develop her psychic gifts, and take up automatic writing. Emma was better at automatic writing than any of them, and here too she had blended unconscious expression with deceit to such an extent that it was impossible to tell where one began and the other ended. She spent hours in this pursuit, and found it interesting. With pencil poised idly over a sheet of paper she would sit in a sort of dream, thinking of nothing in particular, and after a time her hand would begin to move—much as Edward's moved over the margins of the directory while he was telephoning—and she would scrawl patterns, words, initials, sometimes whole sentences, without any definite conscious act of volition. Nothing of any remarkable value ever appeared in these scribbles, but in this, as in other things, her sitters were almost pathetically easy to please. They would study the tangled mass with anxious attention, discover significance in the most banal phrase, and initials where Emma herself would be surprised to find them. And if, in the random wanderings of her pencil, there appeared some little hint or detail which Dawes had given her, the sitter's excitement was usually acute, and Emma would be treated to some welcome perquisites of explanation.

It was in the way of private information that Dawes was now principally useful. He no longer, since Mrs. Pearce's death, practiced as a

medium, for Mrs. Webster too had been dead for eighteen months and he was a man of substance and busy reorganizing J. Webster & Sons, which, with the exception of several small blocks of shares, had by the terms of her will passed entirely into his possession. He was at last very comfortably off, had bought himself a square house with a long garden on Sydenham Hill, where he lived in upholstered comfort with an elderly sister, and was able to indulge his taste for expensive if somber clothes and funereal jewelry. If Mrs. Pearce had lived he might perhaps have allowed his interest in spiritualism to dwindle; but she had not; he was lonely; and his energy required a more flattering outlet than the shop afforded. So he still maintained his position as an interested amateur, had joined a psychical research society and contributed frequent articles to a spiritualist journal, and derived increasing pleasure from the company of Emma. It pleased his vanity that she was now so well established, even enjoying a little flutter of celebrity which was largely of his making; she was a handsome woman, his best friend, a hobby almost; and if he nursed any more pleasurable expectation from their intimacy he kept it pretty well to himself, too cautious to precipitate matters until he was sure of her. In the meantime there were several ways in which he could oblige her. He could build up her circle from among his growing spiritualist acquaintance, at the same time privately furnishing information whenever he could get it, and he could please her by discreetly flattering references in his spiritualist articles.

It was on his advice, and against the repeated urging of her mother, that Emma had refused to give up her amateur status. Apart from the fact that any change of this sort would have been bound to make trouble with Edward, there were many advantages in remaining an unpaid medium. In the first place, she was at complete liberty to impose her own conditions, and it was a curious fact that sitters who came as guests and were not allowed to pay for her services were almost invariably too well mannered to make difficult suggestions. They were always either awed and eager to believe, or they were politely skeptical and never invited again. In this way useless or dangerous members were weeded out of the circle and only the devout remained; and these, quite apart from the results obtained (which were often sufficiently astonishing), were doubly convinced of her genuineness by her unimpeachable gentility and amateur standing. At the same time it was quite allowable for grateful sitters to make the medium a present; after

all, she gave them her time and her hospitality, as well as the miraculous comfort that their hearts yearned for, and as most of the sitters whom Dawes introduced were well able to afford it, some very nice windfalls had come her way in the course of gratitude and friendship. Her cut-glass dressing-table set was one of these, and the silver tray on which she served afternoon tea; so, too, her large butterfly brooch set with moonstones and opals and her astrakhan muff; to say nothing of the gloves, handbags, handkerchiefs, silver inkwells, tooled blotters and embroidered tablecloths which made their appearance at Christmas. And once—delicious and dangerous occasion!—a wholesale furrier who had been made happy by the communications of his infant daughter had sent, with many apologies, a fifty-pound check, begging her to buy herself some token of his gratitude and respect, since he felt himself unequal to the task of choosing a present for a lady. Emma had been overjoyed by the gift, and at the same time frightened, for so large a sum could not be accounted for to Edward, nor any sudden acquisition that it was likely to buy; but here her mother had come to the rescue with sensible advice, and had herself rung up the donor at his City warehouse and suggested that Emma should be allowed to spend his delightful gift on furs; and the two ladies had spent a charming morning in Lower Thames Street, followed by a substantial lunch; so that Emma had been able to show Edward a handsome bunch of stone-marten pelts which her mother had generously given her. Made up into a rich stole they had been both becoming and useful, and Edward had often innocently admired them.

The enjoyment of such rewards, together with the unassailability of her position, were more to Emma than any question of fees. She was able to stand on her own importance and dignity, and was her own mistress in the matter of séance conditions. These could, indeed, on occasion be strict enough, for since she had more or less limited herself to mental phenomena she could have no possible objection to being tied in her chair, or having her hands held, or even to daylight sittings; but since with this type of mediumship such precautions were obviously superfluous, they were generally dispensed with, and the sitters often sat in the dark in a fairly close circle, their hands in their laps. On these occasions Emma showed her good will by wearing luminous bands on her hands and feet, an evidence of scruple which impressed the faithful; but as these little garters, lightly daubed with phosphorescent paint, were simplicity itself to get out of and could be

left on her shoes or lying on her knees as the occasion demanded, leaving hands and feet free, the use of them made no difference to her one way or the other.

Armed as she was with the dignity of a private person who exercised her gifts for no material gain, she could rebuff suspicion with a fine violence of indignation, and such temperamental displays had stood her in good stead on more occasions than one. There had been the time when Mrs. Battersby, one of her firmest supporters, had come accompanied by a cynical husband, and that other unpleasant incident when a spiritualist clergyman had brought an undergraduate son. Mr. Battersby had been rudely insistent in refusing to recognize the spirits, either by name or description, who had claimed his acquaintance, and had said with some heat that he thought his wife a fool and the whole thing sheer nonsense: and the supercilious young man had behaved even worse, having actually struck a match at an inopportune moment, so that only by dropping the trumpet and leaning forward as if in agony over her knees had Emma been able to conceal her freedom from the luminous garters. She had, of course, put them on again as soon as the match was spent and the circle had risen in confusion, and then had given a fine display of pain, shock, indignation and tears, so that the séance had been brought to a fruitless and noisy conclusion, to the secret satisfaction of the clergyman's son and the very real annoyance of the other sitters. On both these occasions the rest of the circle had given her all the support she could have wished, and had turned a cold and angry shoulder on the interrupters, who, needless to say, had never appeared again.

With the members of psychical research societies, who from time to time expressed interest in her mediumship, one had to be more careful; though even in them Emma discovered a far greater degree of credulity than an outsider might have supposed. Suspicious they might be, and noncommittal; but under their caution generally lay the powerful wish to believe which had first led them to investigate this mysterious subject and had touched their pockets to the extent of a society subscription. All these bodies, she reasoned, must be chiefly supported by funds from the pockets of believers, and though their motives were sincere there must be a general bias on the whole in favor of conviction; it was humanly natural to wish for confirmation rather than disappointment of one's hopes. Nevertheless it paid one to be doubly wary, and she discouraged investigation as far as possible. One or two

well-behaved persons had attended her circle in the name of research, but these had been previously recommended by Dawes, and so could be regarded as easy: the others, from the strength of her amateur position, she could always put off, refusing all invitations to give séances under their control on the unanswerable plea that she was not a professional medium, and had a horror of publicity. She took a professional interest, however, in their activities, and spent many a profitable afternoon studying their published proceedings; the conclusions which these scientific gentlemen came to often amused her, and it was instructive to have some detailed knowledge of what other mediums were doing. The accounts of some of these investigations genuinely puzzled her, for though she could guess at the truth of much of this solemn evidence, there were things for which she could find no complete explanation. This Mrs. Piper, for instance, that they made such a fuss about: was she really in touch with the spirit world, or was she extraordinarily clever? Nothing that her spirit guides ever said or wrote seemed of the slightest value; they made mistakes and gave away their ignorance in a way which Emma, unscholarly as she was, could afford to smile at, but she nevertheless, if one could trust the evidence, had powers of arriving at information which she could scarcely have acquired through the ordinary channels of sense, and she was apparently impressing scientists like Sir Oliver Lodge, had had an unimpeachable career, it seemed, in America, and now was engaging the attention of clever people at Cambridge.

Perhaps, thought Emma, it was all a question of degree. Mrs. Piper's success was entirely in mental mediumship; well, so was her own. She eked it out, perhaps, with a little guesswork and information, but Mrs. Piper might do precisely the same for all she knew; and nobody—no, not even Edward at his most skeptical, not even Mr. Morton in the obscure past—could deny that many of her random utterances, her scribbled words and pure shots in the dark, had reached their target. Still, it would be nice to be as uniformly confident as these important mediums. She could not wish for the dangers of professional status, but she envied their success. It would be nice to be certain of impressing a particular sitter; someone like Lady Pensard, for instance, whom she would soon see, and whose imminent visit was causing her some pleasurable anxiety.

Emma was anxious to impress Lady Pensard for several reasons. In the first place, it would add to the prestige of the circle to possess a titled sitter, and though Lady Pensard might not be considered an

aristocrat by purists (she was the widow of a biscuit manufacturer, a tin of whose ginger snaps reposed at this very moment in Emma's sideboard), still, the title was enough, and her ambitious thoughts dwelt on the lady with pleasure. Then, Lady Pensard was rich, and had nothing to do, and was an exceedingly promising recruit to the spiritualist movement. She was undoubtedly the biggest prize that Dawes had yet brought her; she was a charming woman, he had said, and wonderfully enthusiastic, and had not yet given her allegiance to a particular medium. He was bringing her to Grasmere Avenue for the first time that evening; Emma already possessed information about the husband and son she had lost, and various of her relations; and if only this nervous headache could be cured in time she could look forward with fair assurance to a successful sitting. Dawes, of course, could be trusted not to betray any intimacy between them; he always displayed the greatest discretion in the introduction of a new sitter, often professing to have heard of Emma only through some psychical society, and sometimes presenting the newcomer under an assumed name. "Well, there are several good mediums I think I could recommend," he would say, when some new and interested acquaintance asked his advice, "professional mediums, of course, but not necessarily the worse for that. Even mediums must live. Or, if you're interested, there's a rather remarkable lady called Mrs. Shardiloe—not a professional medium at all, but a doctor's wife—who's done some extremely interesting work as a medium and clairvoyante. Of course, her circle is a purely private one; I don't know whether she could care to admit a stranger; but there could be no possible harm in your writing to ask her." And if, as usually happened, the bait was eagerly swallowed, Dawes would sometimes add a word of advice. "If you prefer it," he would say, "you could always introduce yourself under a different name. I know Mrs. Shardiloe wouldn't mind; in fact she welcomes it, because it makes the results themselves so much more evidential. I went to her first myself, I remember, under the name of Stevens. I must admit I was extraordinarily impressed with her." After that he would betray no more than a polite interest, but in the next few days, while the would-be sitter angled for an appointment, he would unobtrusively occupy himself with suitable researches, as sober and respectable a pimp as ever followed the profession.

In the late afternoon, having spent the better part of the day in bed, Emma came downstairs, splendidly pale and handsome in dark green

velvet, and gave Bessie her opportunity. She glanced critically into the séance room, switching the lights on and off and testing the radiator with her hand, and then went into the drawing room, where she rang for tea, and in gracious tones invited Bessie to join her.

"Well, 'm," said Bessie, warming her hands and nibbling buttered toast in a sort of ecstasy, "I 'ardly know 'ow to begin. I been thinking about it all day, but it don't seem possible to believe it myself, so why you should I don't know, I'm sure. 'As that 'eadache of yours nearly gone, 'm?"

"Yes, quite, Bessie, thank you. I feel beautifully rested. Do tell me what's worrying you?"

"Well," said Bessie, "as I was saying, I met my friend Mabel yesterday afternoon, as I usually do Thursdays, and we went to the pictures just as usual, and afterwards, about seven o'clock it was, we went into that Lyons' tea shop at Piccadilly for a bite of something. Well, there wasn't a free table except one, and just as we made for it a man got there in front of us and sat down. Well, we didn't mind; there was three other chairs, so we sat down opposite to 'im and ordered what we fancied. I thought at the time 'e was a funny-lookin' customer, respectable, o' course, but I wouldn't ha' said a gentleman; very thin 'e was, shrunken a'most, very small, and rather thin on top, but with a big mustache. I can't think why, but I noticed 'is false teeth. You could see they weren't real when 'e bit into 'is roll and butter, but they looked all right, o' course. Will you 'ave another finger of toast, 'm? You didn't 'ave no lunch, remember.

"Well, as I was saying, I didn't take no notice of 'im at first; I was talking to my friend, and telling 'er about 'ow your pore ma wasn't at all well these days, and didn't seem to like the bungalow in Surrey, not like the big 'ouse in Brixton. I was just starting to tell 'er about Mr. Shardiloe being so suited by 'is retirement, and taking ever such an interest in 'is fowls, when I noticed this person opposite was listening, and in a minute 'e leans across the table. 'Pardon me,' 'e says, very anxious, 'but I 'eard you mention the name of somebody I know. Am I right,' 'e says, 'in thinking you are referring to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Shardiloe of Brixton 'Ill?' 'What if I am?' I says, giving my friend a look. I didn't like it, I can tell you. 'Nothing,' 'e says, 'on'y I 'appen to be related to them, and I couldn't 'elp over'earing what you was saying.' 'Well,' I says, 'no offense, I 'ope.' 'Not at all,' 'e says, 'and I 'ope you ladies will excuse me. But may I ask,' 'e says, 'if you are con-

nected with the family?' Well, I couldn't for the life of me see no 'arm, so I told 'im I used to be in service with Mrs. Shardiloe before I was married, and 'ad been a good many years now with 'er daughter. 'What, Miss Lily?' 'e says, as quick as anything. 'No,' I says, 'Miss Emma, as was; she's married to a doctor.' 'Oh,' 'e says, disappointed like, 'I thought you must ha' meant Miss Lily; at least, I should say, Mrs. Webster.' 'Mrs. Butler *now*,' I told 'im; 'I'm surprised you shouldn't know 'er right name,' I said, suspicious. I'd never seen 'im before, 'm, that I'll swear; I was getting ever so nervous. 'Oh,' 'e said, looking queer, 'I'd forgotten about that. I been abroad a good many years,' 'e said, 'in Egypt and South Africa.'"

"South Africa!" said Emma, looking startled.

"Yes, 'm, South Africa," said Bessie, giving a significant nod. "Just you wait, though. After a bit 'e said, 'And 'ow is Mrs. Butler? It's above twelve years since I last seen 'er. And the little girl, Suzanne; she must be ever so big.' Well, I seen from that that 'e must know the family, so I told 'im about Mrs. Butler being in the 'otel business in Brighton, and 'aving a little boy, and doing ever so well. 'E acted as though 'e couldn't 'ear enough, and at the same time 'e seemed so queer, wiping 'is mouth on 'is 'andkerchief all the time and fidgeting with 'is cup and saucer. At last 'e says, 'Well, I don't know but what I should like to go and see 'er. I don't know for sure,' 'e says, 'but per'aps you'd oblige me by giving me 'er address.' 'I couldn't do that,' I said: I didn't know what 'e was after. 'Well,' 'e said, 'at least you can give me Mrs. Shardiloe's address, or Miss Emma's. I been past their old house in Brixton, and it's all boarded up, to let. And I been to the shop, too,' 'e says, 'Webster & Dawes Ltd.,' 'e says, pushing 'is cup about. I could see 'is 'ands were shaking. 'I'm sorry,' I said, giving my friend a look, 'it's not for me to give any addresses to strangers. You can find out for yourself, I'm sure, and I 'ope you'll pardon me.' 'Oh yes,' 'e said, 'I could go to Brighton, couldn't I, and look in the telephone book. Or I could go to the shop again and ask to see Mr. Dawes. I've thought of that,' 'e said, 'but I can't make up my mind to it.' 'Well,' I said, 'that's your affair, o' course; if you're such an old friend of the family there shouldn't be no difficulty.' 'No difficulty!' 'e says, taking me up sharp. 'You don't know what you're talking about. Can't you see I'm a sick man?' 'e said, 'my nerves are all gone to pieces. You can't go through what I been through,' 'e says, 'first the war, and then all those years in the Dutch 'ospital without so much as knowing

me own name, without suffering for it after,' 'e says, 'it isn't reasonable.' 'Well, I'm sorry,' I said, 'but I don't even know your name, do I?' 'E looked at me and 'e looked at my friend. 'I don't know as I ought to tell you,' 'e said, 'it can't do no good now. I was a fool to come. All the same,' 'e said, 'my name 'appens to be Webster.' "

"Webster!" said Emma, staring. "Bessie, you don't think . . . it couldn't possibly . . . "

"Ah," said Bessie, "that's what I don't know. I'm only telling you what 'appened. But the same thought occurred to me, and I asked 'im what 'e meant about the war, and the Dutch 'ospital. 'E didn't tell me much, 'e kept on saying it was no good now; but I got out of 'im that 'e'd been seven or eight years in a Dutch 'ospital after the war, with terrible 'ead injuries. That's 'ow 'is teeth went, 'e said, and 'e 'ad one brain operation after another, and the 'ospital didn't know 'oo 'e was, no more than 'e done 'imself. After that, 'e said, a clergyman got 'im a post doing clerk work in a Lutheran mission, and 'e'd gone to Egypt with a branch of the mission, and 'ad been there ever since. And while 'e was working there, 'e said, it 'ad gradually come back to 'im 'oo 'e was and where 'e belonged, and 'e'd got the minister to advance 'im 'is passage money when 'e was going back to Germany on leave, and 'e'd come back to England when the clergyman left, and 'ad been in London a fortnight."

"But didn't you *ask* him?" said Emma.

"Oh yes, 'm, I did, of course. 'You're not trying to tell me,' I said, 'that you're anything to do with Mr. Leonard Webster that was killed in the war?' 'I'm not telling you anything,' 'e said, 'that's going to do anyone any harm. If I make up my mind to it,' 'e said, 'I can make myself known in the proper quarter. I may do that,' 'e said, 'or I may go back to Egypt. I'm not 'elpless. And when the next war starts,' 'e said, 'mark my words, I'd rather be in Egypt than 'ere.' 'What d'you mean?' I said, 'what war?' 'The war with Germany, of course,' 'e said, 'it's common talk, isn't it?' 'No,' I said, 'I never 'eard of such a thing.' 'Well,' 'e said, 'I give it twelve months. You see if I'm not right,' 'e said. Well, I just put that down to 'is being queer in the 'ead, so I said, 'Never mind about the war, 'adn't you better give me your address?' 'I'll give you an accommodation address,' 'e said. 'If anybody likes to write to me there I can collect the letter. I can't tell you my movements for certain,' 'e said. So 'e wrote it down on a piece of paper, and here it is, 'm."

Bessie produced a scrap of paper from her pocket, on which the address of a newsagent's in Horseferry Road was written in pencil. Emma studied it, frowning.

"Well Bessie," she said, "I can't say that I recognize the writing. It's such a scrap, isn't it? Anybody might have written it. Didn't he give you any other clue?"

"No, 'm. When 'e done that 'e paid 'is bill and said good evening. 'E shook 'ands with us both and said 'e was very grateful. I can't think what to make of it, can you, 'm?"

"I don't know; I don't know," said Emma. "It's the most extraordinary thing I ever heard. I shall have to ask the doctor about it before I decide anything. Oh dear, we must be careful. You won't, of course, say anything to Mrs. Shardiloe about it, will you? Or Mrs. Butler? It'll only upset them if it isn't true; and if it is—well, I absolutely dread to think what the result might be. The shock would kill my poor sister, I really believe." She stared thoughtfully into the fire, twisting the paper in her fingers. "Oh no, on second thoughts, Bessie, it simply *can't* be true. He must be just some poor demented person who happened to know our names and something about the family. Tell me again exactly what he looked like?"

Bessie described him once more to the best of her ability, and when she had finished Emma shook her head. "Oh no," she said, "he simply couldn't have changed so much in only twelve years. I don't believe you ever saw Mr. Leonard Webster?"

"No, 'm, only a photo. I'd left, if you remember, long before Miss Lily was married. I shouldn't really think it was possible, would you, 'm?"

"No, frankly, I shouldn't. In any case, Bessie, you mustn't say anything about it. I know I can perfectly rely on you to keep a secret."

"Oh yes, to be sure you can, 'm," said Bessie, pleased by this flattering tribute to her discretion. She went back to the kitchen at last in high good humor, eased of her burden of melodrama and warmed with the importance and pride of her mistress's confidence.

When she was gone Emma fetched her keys from her desk and went up to the attic, where she rummaged among boxes until she found an old writing-case stuffed with a miscellany of letters. These, kneeling on the dusty floor, she sorted and examined, reopening torn envelopes and reading a page here and there until she became so absorbed as almost to forget what she had come for; but at last she found Leonard's

solitary letter among the rest, and carried it under the skylight to compare with the penciled scrap which Bessie had given her. She had been accustomed to the study of handwriting for her own purposes, but was disappointed to see how little evidence the comparison afforded. The penciled address, shakily written and none too distinct, might, as she had said, have been written by anybody. One or two single characters might perhaps be suggestive, an A or an E openly or carelessly formed, but nowhere was there a whole word to serve as a reliable check on any word in the letter. Even the signature was no use, for the letter had been signed, naturally, "Leonard," whereas on the scrap of paper in her hand was written "Mr. Webster, c/o J. Bletching (Newsagent), 87 Horseferry Road, Pimlico." Emma's memory responded idiotically to the name of the newsagent, and for a moment this puzzled her, until she realized that she had been struck by a similarity to the name of the little dressmaker, poor Mrs. Bletchley, who always wanted to come to her séances but was really far too crazy, endlessly babbling about reincarnation through a mouthful of pins, and her memories of her previous life as Mary Magdalen. No, it was no use. She would have to consult Edward as to the best course to pursue. Perhaps Bessie had imagined a good deal, given more away to the stranger than she had been aware of: nobody knew better than Emma how readily most people did this, and deceived themselves afterwards. The whole thing was improbable and mad. It would be a waste of time to write to this unlikely address; it was better forgotten. In any case, she argued, if by any stretch of possibility this man were Leonard, he would come forward soon enough. There were a dozen ways in which he could get in touch with Lily. He knew her present name, and the fact that she lived in Brighton and was married to a hotel proprietor. How the sudden appearance of Leonard would upset her smugness! She almost hoped it might be true, for the sake of so dramatic a dénouement. But then, she thought more soberly, if the man were really Leonard, and knew Lily's circumstances, would he be certain, after all, to reveal himself? From Bessie's description he had sounded shabby, neurotic, prematurely old; he could hardly expect to receive a rapturous welcome. Lily was getting on for forty now, and prosperously settled; she would be the last person, surely, to want him back from the dead. Struck by an unwelcome thought Emma stood still in the dusk, uncomfortably brooding. Of course, it was all a long time ago, but Lily would be sure to remember that unfortunate occasion

when she herself had given voice to his departed spirit; she might make trouble over it, even now; she was quite capable of it. And Dawes, hadn't he done the same thing too, with Mrs. Webster? Hadn't he built the whole strength of his position, in her latter years, on being the mouthpiece of her children? Disturbed by the unpleasantness of these reflections Emma roused herself in the dark attic, shuffled the letters back into her writing-case and took the possibly incriminating scrap of paper down to the drawing room, where she locked it in her desk. She was now in two minds as to whether she should mention the matter to Edward at all. She might, of course, contrive to suppress Bessie's story and claim clairvoyant knowledge of Leonard's return . . . what prophecies she could make, what revelations! But then, supposing he just went back to Egypt, without seeing any of them? She might stir up a hornet's nest for herself, and be no better for her trouble. Oh, it was difficult, difficult; too hard a problem to resolve just now, when she had other things to think of. The worry of it had brought a return of her headache, and in a few hours Lady Pensard would be here, hoping for miracles. She decided to lie down on the sofa and close her eyes, clearing her mind for that state of receptive calm on which success depended.

Shortly before eleven o'clock Edward let himself in at the front door, listened for a moment with his hat and umbrella in his hand, and then dodged into the hall lavatory. The drawing-room door was ajar and he could hear voices, the raised social voices of people making their departure; only by the skin of his teeth had he managed to escape them. He closed the door softly and bolted it, running no risks. The voices were in the hall now, and he could hear Emma speaking.

"Well, I'm so glad," she was saying, "that it proved so interesting for you. I very nearly telephoned this afternoon and put you off; I've had such a headache all day I felt fit for nothing."

"Oh, how *wretched* for you!" said a woman's voice, a pleasant voice, though rather deliberately sweet and overemphatic. "I'm *so* glad you didn't, though. I *should* have been disappointed. It's been such a wonderful evening, hasn't it? Though I'm afraid your poor headache must have suffered. Is it absolute *agony*?"

"Oh no," said Emma, "it's much better now, thank you. It's a curious thing, but I've often found that trance will relieve a headache in the

most extraordinary way. It seems to take it away, and leave one quite light and clear afterwards."

"Does it *really*? What an amazing gift! I mean, if it only did that it would be worth it, wouldn't it? I'm a perfect martyr to headaches myself; real migraine, you know; simply *nothing* touches it."

"Perhaps I could help you a little with that," said Emma; "sometimes psychic treatment . . ."

"Oh, that would be *wonderful*; though it seems a very trivial use for your marvelous gifts. Really, Mrs. Shardiloe, I've never been so impressed! I do hope you meant it when you said I could come again? I know it's a terrible imposition, and I can't thank you enough already, but . . ."

"But of course," said Emma. "Nothing could give me greater pleasure. Anyone genuinely interested, like yourself, is always welcome. Please don't wait for an invitation."

"Oh, you *are* kind! I should simply love to come one evening next week. I haven't got my book with me, so may I telephone you in the morning? I won't ring up too early, you'll need a *good* rest. We've kept you shockingly late tonight, I'm afraid, with all our talking. I expect my car's been here for hours."

"Oh, Mr. Dawes, would you kindly look outside and see if Lady Pensard's car is here? It is? Oh, splendid! Well . . ."

A blast of cold air blew under the lavatory door, and Edward sighed. If only he had got home a minute earlier he could have got upstairs; and if the bed had been covered with women's coats he could at least have been reading the newspapers in the bath. He dropped his umbrella with a clatter and swore softly.

At last the front door shut for the last time and he came out of hiding, irritably blowing his nose. All the lights of the house seemed to be on, and Emma was in the dining room, pouring a drink. She looked flushed and handsome, and had a cigarette in her mouth.

"Hullo," he said. "Your friends are late, aren't they? I nearly got caught."

"I heard you clattering," said Emma. "D'you want some whisky? You look as if you were starting a cold."

"I don't think I am. I've been in a smoky atmosphere all evening, it always makes my eyes run. It's no joke, with half the women smoking as well as the men. I find I oversmoke in self-defense."

"Do they really, in public meetings?"

"Well, this was really a private meeting. Anyhow, you smoke like a chimney yourself."

"Not in public," said Emma, smiling. "But then, I'm not a socialist, or a suffragette, am I? I can't pretend to compete with your advanced friends."

They drank their whisky in silence, smiling guardedly at one another.

"Who's the woman with the voice?" said Edward at last. "She's a new one, isn't she?"

"Her name's Lady Pensard. She's the widow of the man who makes those nice biscuits."

"Oh, I know about *them*. They make biscuits in a nice factory in the East End, where they just had a nice strike. Is she a convert?"

"You could call her that, I suppose. You're superior, aren't you?"

"No," said Edward, helping himself to more whisky, "I just mind my own business. That's the least I can do—or the most, I never can decide which." He looked at her with a sort of amused affection, half admiringly. "You look very beautiful in that green dress. Why don't you sometimes come out with me in it?"

"You never ask me."

"Don't I? Well, I ask you now."

"Darling, you never go to anything interesting."

"Well, I could. I'll take you to Maskelyne and Devant's, if you like. You'd find that fascinating, I expect."

Emma laughed, though not very pleasantly.

"Should I?" she said. "I'm not so unsophisticated as you think. I once knew a real magician, called Majo the Magnificent. I often wonder what's become of him."

"So that's it," said Edward. "Childhood influences are very important, aren't they? There's a lot in it."

Still smiling, but with a wary feeling that they were getting on quarrelsome ground, Emma changed the subject.

"Bessie had a long story to tell me today," she said, "about a mysterious stranger she met in a Lyons' teashop. He claimed to know all about us, and asked for our address."

"Wants to borrow money, I expect. Did Bessie give him anything?"

"No. I think he was probably mad. You know how fond she is of having adventures. He prophesied a war with Germany within twelve months, and gave her a thing called an accommodation address, in case

she wanted to write to him. He said he was my sister's husband back from the grave, and a lot of other things."

"Did he indeed? Well, well, well. What fun Bessie has, doesn't she? He doesn't sound much of a prophet to me. Though I don't know," he said, staring at his glass, "some people think Germany means to have a slap at France one of these days. I doubt it myself. We've got past that, I hope. Asquith keeps on saying we're friendly with Germany, though if there *was* a flare-up with France I suppose we'd be dragged into it on one side or the other. All statesmen are professional liars." He drained his glass and put it on the sideboard, looking gloomy.

"Anyhow," said Emma yawning, "it can't make any difference to us. I expect it's all nonsense."

"Oh, it's nonsense, all right. The only disturbing thing is that nonsense is generally mischievous, as I've often tried to tell you. But don't let's go into that tonight."

"No, don't let's, darling. It's *so* boring. And I really am tired."

They went upstairs together, slowly and in silence, switching off the lights.

Chapter X

(1917-1918)

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ONE CLEAR BRIGHT AFTERNOON IN THE AUTUMN OF 1917 a car turned in through the archway of Lincoln's Inn and nosed around, looking for Paper Buildings. It was a large car, with a gas-bag jellying about on the roof like a punctured Zeppelin, and in the back, at a luxurious distance from the chauffeur, two well-dressed women lay under a fur rug.

At last the chauffeur found the doorway he was looking for and the two women got out and went up the unwelcoming stone steps and studied the list of names on the staircase wall.

"Mitchison, Buff, Fullalove and Mitchison. There we are, Mildred. I thought I remembered it was up on the second floor."

They toiled up two flights of stairs and pushed open the door of a small outer office, where a youth was leaning on the table over a comic paper and rhythmically kicking a pile of deed boxes with the toe of his boot.

"I have an appointment with Mr. Mitchison," said the smaller lady, in tones of sweet authority, "Lady Pensard and Mrs. Britten, tell him."

"All right, sit down. I'll go and see," said the boy, and tore himself away.

"Really, these lawyers' offices make me smile," said the larger lady. "Dust and deed boxes and dirty office boys are all very well as local color, but they do overdo it, don't they?"

"Hush, Mildred. You've no idea how your voice carries. Mitchison, Buff, Fullalove and Mitchison are probably all on the other side of that partition."

In a few minutes the boy came back, accompanied by a clerk, and the ladies were ushered into a room as impressive as the outer office had been uncomfortable. They had a confused impression of deep carpet, crowded bookcases and heavyweight furniture as they advanced to the imposing desk in front of the window. Mr. Mitchison got up

from his chair and shook hands, revealing the surprising fact that he was an inch or two shorter standing than he was sitting down. He resumed his chair somewhat hastily, and from this point of vantage presented so dignified a figure that one received the impression that he must at least be sitting on the Post Office Directory.

"Now then," he said, when they had discussed the war, the weather and the petrol shortage, "tell me just exactly what I can do for you."

"Well," said Lady Pensard, "it's rather difficult. I gave you some indication over the telephone, but I didn't like to discuss it too fully. You never know who's listening."

"Quite, quite."

"It concerns, as I told you, a spiritualist medium who calls herself Mrs. Shardiloe. My sister and I are quite convinced that she's a fraud, but the difficulty is, that we've been going to her for such a long time, and in the best of faith—at least I have; my sister only started going a few months ago, after Lieutenant Britten was killed. It was on account of that that we first started to suspect her, and naturally it's caused us a great deal of distress; and Mr. Armitage, the editor of the *Globe*, who saw the photographs and is a very old friend of mine, assured us we should have a good case if we wanted to prosecute; but the only thing I'm afraid of is the publicity, because although it's a disgraceful scandal and ought to be exposed, one doesn't want to look foolish."

"Quite, quite," said Mr. Mitchison, polishing his glasses. "That kind of thing always requires most delicate handling, and I may as well warn you in the beginning that these so-called mediums are very slippery people, very difficult to pin down. The law is still able to regard them as rogues and vagabonds, but only in special circumstances, and though you'll find that most judges have a healthy prejudice against them, there's really only one specific charge that's any use. I refer, of course, to obtaining money by fraud. For example, fortunetelling."

"Well, that's another difficulty," said Lady Pensard, leaning eagerly forward, "but I'm sure you will agree . . ."

"Wait a moment," said Mr. Mitchison, holding up his hand. "I should also warn you at the outset that, however good your case, you are very unlikely to recover adequate damages. These people are usually not worth twopence. They operate on a shoestring, as our American allies would say; they are generally unable to meet the costs, let alone pay damages."

"Oh, but that's not really the point," said Lady Pensard, flushing a

little. "It's not with the idea of making money, or even recovering what I've spent, that I should like to prosecute. You know my circumstances too well, I hope, to imagine that."

"Quite, quite."

"It's just that, for my sister's sake as well as my own, I think this woman ought to be punished. I feel it's my public duty to expose her. Think of all the poor people she has deceived, Mr. Mitchison. Especially people like my sister, who have lost sons or relatives in the war. In my opinion it's unpatriotic as well as wicked. She has made a very good thing out of the war, I can assure you."

"I quite believe you," said Mr. Mitchison, "but the point is, in your case, Lady Pensard, has money passed hands?"

"Oh yes! Oh good gracious, yes! I was reckoning up the other day that in the last four years she's had eight hundred pounds out of me in one shape or another."

"Ah," said Mr. Mitchison, drawing a sheet of paper toward him and unscrewing a gold fountain pen, "ah, *now* we're getting somewhere. Perhaps you would tell me the whole story, right from the beginning."

Lady Pensard unfastened her furs and asked for a glass of water. When this had been obtained and she had sipped nervously for a moment, wondering what it was about lawyers that always made one feel so much in the wrong, she related the history of her acquaintance with Mrs. Shardiloe. She was very much interested in spiritualism, she said, and had heard of this woman through a man called Dawes, whom she had met at a *conversazione* in South Kensington, following a spiritualist lecture. She had written to Mrs. Shardiloe and been invited to a number of *séances*, by which, she was bound to admit, she had been impressed.

"Invited?" said Mr. Mitchison. "You paid this woman, I imagine, some sort of fee?"

"Oh no. She's not a professional medium. She's a doctor's wife in Muswell Hill; she doesn't charge anything."

"Oh dear," said the solicitor, and laid down his pen. He gazed accusingly at the ladies over his spectacles.

"Oh, but wait!" said Lady Pensard, seeing his drift. "She doesn't accept any fees; that's just her cleverness. But she accepts presents from clients—money and jewelry and fur coats and things of that kind."

And her real name, it turns out, isn't Mrs. Shardiloe at all. It's Mrs. Massingham."

"Ah!" said Mr. Mitchison, and took up his pen again.

For two or three years, Lady Pensard went on, she had been a fairly regular sitter in Mrs. Shardiloe's circle, and had, with what now seemed a most foolish innocence, believed her mediumship to be thoroughly genuine. Through spirit guides and automatic writing Mrs. Shardiloe had apparently put her in touch with both her son and her husband, had described the boy's death quite accurately as well as his happy life in the spirit world, and had revealed an impressive knowledge of family circumstances and affairs which had seemed to prove her clairvoyant faculty beyond a doubt; though now, Lady Pensard realized, she had told her nothing which could not have been found out by underhand means.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of money ("Quite," said Mr. Mitchison, "we shall have to go into that *most* carefully"), nothing had happened to rouse her suspicions until after her nephew had been killed, and she had persuaded her sister, Mrs. Britten, to visit the medium. For a time all had gone well, until Mrs. Britten, who had been shown some spirit photographs by a friend, began to take a great interest in this phenomenon, and had begged Mrs. Shardiloe to attempt it, in the hope that some evidence of Lieutenant Britten's presence might be traced on the negative.

"And here," said Lady Pensard, "we come to the question of presents, for I must admit that Mrs. Shardiloe was *most* reluctant, and was only persuaded to try the spirit photography by what I now realize was a foolishly extravagant bribe."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Mitchison, writing busily.

"You see, I had given her a good many presents in the past, so it seemed the natural thing to do. I had taken her time, and her hospitality, and quite early in our acquaintance I began to feel uncomfortable about making her no return. She was obviously not poor, you know, but in very ordinary circumstances; whereas I, as you know, am rather fortunately placed in that respect; and so, starting with flowers and gloves and little things of that kind, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to give her some sort of payment for all her trouble. She was very pleased when I did, and made no objection when, out of the purest gratitude, I gave her a piece of jewelry she had often admired. She even said that a great many of her sitters gave

her presents, and that she appreciated it, that it gave her confidence, and so on. I thought this very fair and sensible, and in the course of time I gave her a lot of nice things, especially when I introduced any of my friends into the circle. It seemed such an imposition otherwise, you know, and she was always quite frankly pleased to accept anything. And then, as time went on, it was just less trouble to send her checks, and she said what a wonderful help the money was, and that it enabled her to help her mother, who was very poor, and so on. Anyway, she made no objection.

"Well, as I was saying, about six months ago I took my sister to see her; and as the results were very encouraging we began to broach the subject of spirit photography." Here Mrs. Britten began to search in her handbag, and brought out and studied two or three well-thumbed photographs. "Mrs. Shardiloe didn't want to do it at all. She made all sorts of excuses; said she had never done it before and didn't understand photography and all that sort of thing; but when she found that we were quite set on the experiment, even if it meant going to another medium, she began to change her tune, and said she would consult her spirit guides about it, and so on. And then, Mr. Mitchison, she definitely *hinted*."

"Hinted?"

"Yes. She talked about not being a professional medium, and the strain it was on her health, and the demands people made on her, not knowing she wasn't well, and how badly she always felt the cold, and so on. Well, I was still very anxious to make her a fair return, so I offered to make her a further present of money. 'After all,' I said, 'other mediums are paid for their work, and I don't see why you shouldn't be.' You see, Mr. Mitchison, it was absolutely the greatest interest in our lives at this time, and we were most anxious to go on with it. Well, she wouldn't. She said she was afraid her husband wouldn't like it; presents in kind, she said, were another matter, but she was getting nervous about money. I didn't know what to do, but just as we were leaving she began admiring our fur coats very pointedly, and went back to this question of not being well, and feeling the cold so much. Well, that gave us an idea. I talked it over with my sister, and we decided to have a nice coat sent to her on approval, in the hope that she would take it. She's a very fascinating woman, you know, Mr. Mitchison, very convincing and attractive. Naturally I didn't choose the most expensive; but I paid ninety guineas for it;

it was a nice gray squirrel. Well, as you can imagine, she was delighted with it, and very soon after that—it makes me smile to think of it if I weren't so angry—she said she was willing to try the spirit photography.

"She'd got hold of a quite good camera which she said was her husband's (we knew who he was by this time, though we never saw him; his name's Dr. Massingham and he has a practice near Muswell Hill station) and we bought the plates ourselves, which had to be sent to her beforehand so that she could magnetize them. She took a number of photographs of my sister during sittings, and we were very excited. Well, the first plates showed nothing out of the ordinary. The woman's no fool, Mr. Mitchison. But the second time a sort of whitish blur appeared on the photograph, above my sister's head, and after that we got several distinct impressions of Lieutenant Britten. Give me those photographs a moment, Mildred."

Lady Pensard looked at them carefully and laid a print on the desk.

"Look. This is one of the first. Just a rather bad photograph of my sister, sitting in front of a curtain. In *this* one, though, which came in the second batch, there's a sort of whitish something over her head."

"Rather as though light had got into the camera," said Mr. Mitchison.

"Exactly. Mrs. Shardiloe said it was a nebula, however, and wanted to try again. So we had a third sitting, and these are the results." She laid two more prints on the table and stood up to point.

"The nebula, you see, has emerged quite plainly in each case as a head of my nephew; one full face, one profile; perfectly recognizable. Mrs. Shardiloe was delighted, and so were we. It seemed such a wonderful proof of all that we had come to believe; it brought the reality of his presence so very much closer."

"Quite," said Mr. Mitchison dubiously, studying the photographs. Lady Pensard gave her sister a sympathetic glance and sat down again.

"We were so pleased, in fact, that we showed the photographs to a great many of our friends, including Mr. Armitage of the *Sunday Globe*, who used to be a friend of my husband's. He was the only one of our friends who was openly skeptical, and we were rather hurt; but he's a very sensible, clever sort of man, so when he asked to borrow the photographs I let him. Well, to make a long story

short, he identified one of the photographs, the full-face one, as being the very same one that he had on his files in the office. My nephew, you know, was reported missing for some weeks before he was known to be killed, and a small photograph of him had appeared in the papers, among a lot of others. You know how the picture papers have dozens of them every day. It hadn't appeared in the *Globe*, but apparently it was there on the files in the proper department.

"Well, as you can imagine, we were very reluctant to believe that the whole thing was a fake. 'After all,' I said to Mr. Armitage, 'one full-face impression of my nephew would look very like another, and the photograph isn't so clear that one can be sure about it.' As you see, Mr. Mitchison, there's a sort of woolly haze all round the features that makes it difficult. But Mr. Armitage was quite positive, and he got his photography people to enlarge up the print to about ten times its size, and then you could see something that Mr. Armitage called the 'half-tone grain' across the spirit face in the photograph, perfectly clearly."

Mrs. Britten produced a big envelope from her muff and the enlargement was laid on the desk for Mr. Mitchison's inspection.

"You see," said Mrs. Britten, "there's a sort of mottled grain come up on the face which doesn't appear anywhere else on the photograph. It isn't on *my* face, for instance, or the curtain behind us; it's only on my son's."

"And Mr. Armitage," said Lady Pensard, "said it was something to do with the photoengraver's screen, and that it's quite unmistakable. He said that Mrs. Shardiloe had obviously cut out the head from an actual newspaper and imposed it on the negative. *I* said: 'She doesn't understand photography, she's only a beginner.' And *he* said she could have got any jobbing photographer to do it."

Lady Pensard sat back in her chair with an anxious expression and Mr. Mitchison took off his spectacles.

"My dear lady," he said, tapping them rather testily on the photographs, "the whole thing is quite obviously a fraud, and though I'm no amateur of photography I have no difficulty at all in agreeing with your friend Mr. Armitage. But"—here he pointed his spectacles like an accusing forefinger at Lady Pensard—"but there's no law against tampering with photographic plates and pretending the results are something that they're not. You could do it. I could do it. And nobody would have a case against us, provided—*provided*, I say—that we

didn't charge a fee for our spirit photographs on the grounds that they were genuine."

"Oh but," said Lady Pensard eagerly, "you're forgetting the fur coat, Mr. Mitchison! And the checks at different times, and all the other presents. As I told you, I worked the whole thing out, and I've parted with pretty well eight hundred pounds to that woman!"

Mr. Mitchison shook his head.

"It doesn't make the least difference," he said. "You could have given her eight thousand if you'd liked, in voluntary presents, and unless you can prove that any of it was accepted as a definite fee, in consideration of spirit photographs which this Mrs. Shardiloe claimed to be able to produce, and which were afterwards found to have been produced by fraudulent means, you haven't a leg to stand on."

"But it stands to *reason*," said Lady Pensard, looking a little wild; "naturally I didn't give her these presents just out of love. They were a kind of payment. That was perfectly understood."

"They were, however," said Mr. Mitchison, closing his eyes, "perfectly voluntary?"

"I wouldn't say the fur coat was exactly voluntary," objected Lady Pensard, looking at her sister; "would you, Mildred? It was nothing less than extortion. Nothing was *said*, of course, but it was perfectly clear that the fur coat produced the photographs."

"You have nothing in writing, I suppose," said Mr. Mitchison, still with his eyes closed, "to establish that such was the case?"

"Do you mean a receipt? No, naturally not. It was all done in a . . . in a friendly spirit. It wasn't until Mr. Armitage opened our eyes, and made us realize that we were being deceived, that we were anything but friendly. I naturally never thought of anything like this. Even when I wrote and told her our suspicions and asked for the coat back I . . ."

Mr. Mitchison opened his eyes so suddenly that Lady Pensard jumped.

"You wrote to her, you say? Did you keep a copy of the letter?"

"Well, yes, I did. I was for letting the whole thing drop, I was so disgusted, but the thought of that fur coat rankled, and Mr. Armitage advised me to write and ask for it back, and he very kindly dictated the letter himself, and said I must keep a copy."

"Ah," said Mr. Mitchison, putting on his spectacles and taking the

letter which Lady Pensard produced from her handbag. He studied it for a moment or two in silence.

"Your journalist friend," he said at length, "appreciates, I see, the niceties of the position. This is his wording, I take it? M'm, I thought so. The letter states quite plainly that the photographs are fakes, and asks for the return of the fur coat 'which was given in consideration of several sittings at which the said spirit photographs were produced.' Quite competently put. 'Consideration' is a valuable word. May I ask what reply, if any, you received from this lady?"

"I was just coming to that. She didn't reply at all at first, so I wrote again, saying I hoped she had received my letter and that I expected an answer to it. And then I got this, in which she says there must be a misunderstanding, as the photographs are perfectly genuine as far as she knows, and that she's sorry she can't return the fur coat as she's already given it to her sister."

"Ah," said Mr. Mitchison, taking the letter. His face betrayed a gleam of professional pleasure. "She doesn't deny what you said in your first letter about the fur coat being a consideration? No, good, I see she doesn't. She is evidently less experienced than your friend Mr. Armitage." He read Emma's letter, pinching his lower lip, and then laid the two letters side by side on the desk and looked at Lady Pensard over his spectacles.

"Now," he said, "before we go any further, there is one thing I want to have absolutely clear. In any action which I may or may not advise you to take, you do not expect to recover substantial damages?"

"No."

"You do not even expect to recover sufficient to pay your own costs?"

"No. I should like to get back the fur coat and I should like to punish her. I consider it my public duty."

"Quite. And supposing, on receiving the writ (assuming that one could be served on her on the grounds of fraud, and for the return of the fur coat and other valuables), this lady immediately offers to return them to you, together with the money you have given her at different times? I am bearing in mind, Lady Pensard, that most people would rather climb down than have the issue decided in open court."

"Yes, but——"

"One moment, please. I am also bearing in mind that this lady is

not an independent person, but married to a doctor. Dr.—Massingham, I think you said?—will be bound to consider his professional reputation; and it would be worth his while, not only to see that the goods and money are returned, but to offer you the best financial compensation he can afford, rather than have his wife defend such a case. To be mixed up in an affair like that would be professional ruin, and you must ask yourself whether it would be worth your while to start proceedings which may very possibly never reach the court.”

Lady Pensard looked uncomfortable.

“I must confess,” she said, “that if it ended like that it would be too disappointing for words. Not worth one’s while, I agree. But *surely*—” she threw out her hands and looked appealingly at Mr. Mitchison “—surely the return of the fur coat and so on isn’t the *only* thing? That’s not what I’m aiming at, you see. What I want to do, what I feel it’s my public *duty* to do is to expose her. After all, I can afford the fur coat and the money; it isn’t that. But think of the *other* people she’s fleecing, Mr. Mitchison. She’s a public danger.”

Mr. Mitchison pinched his lower lip and regarded Lady Pensard over his spectacles, but said nothing.

“Surely you can advise us,” said Mrs. Britten. “There must be *some* way of catching this woman. I can’t believe that the law just calmly allows this kind of thing, and doesn’t *want* it punished?”

“My dear lady, you could put all the money you possessed down the drain outside this building, and the law wouldn’t be bound to take a ha’porth of notice.”

Mrs. Britten blushed painfully and stared out of the window. Her eyes filled with tears.

“Now do, please, advise us,” said Lady Pensard. “Isn’t there any way in which she can be forced into court? Obviously if she can’t, my whole idea is a failure.” She looked at him coquettishly, making a struggle for her lovely avenging idea.

“I can only advise you,” said Mr. Mitchison at last, “against my better judgment. That is to say, your case strikes me as being a slender one from the legal point of view, and if I were Dr. Massingham’s solicitor I should certainly advise him to settle it out of court. And even if it came into court, I doubt if you would get much out of it beyond moral satisfaction.”

“But that’s what I *want*,” said Lady Pensard virtuously.

“Moral satisfaction is sometimes an expensive luxury,” said the

solicitor with a faint smile, "and your chance of obtaining it seems to me to depend on the doctor's means. Is he in a position, for instance, to refund you that eight hundred pounds as soon as you ask for it? If he is, he will no doubt do so, and your case falls to the ground. If not, there may be no option but defense, in which case you are still less likely to recover anything."

Lady Pensard shook her head and made a negative gesture with one hand.

"That doesn't really matter," she said, "As to settling it out of court, I should be astonished if they could. If they were the sort of people who could lay their hands on eight hundred pounds at a moment's notice, why should Mrs. Massingham always have been so glad of the money? The house is just a nondescript suburban villa, you know; it makes a most *ordinary* impression. Of course," she went on hurriedly, catching an ambiguous look in Mr. Mitchison's eye, "the last thing I want to do is to persecute the doctor, though nothing will convince me that he isn't just as much to blame as his wife. They probably shared out the money behind my back. It's not impossible."

"No," said Mr. Mitchison, "it's not impossible, as you say, though it would be a very discreditable thing for a doctor to do. However, human nature being the sad affair it is . . ." He took off his spectacles and polished them dubiously. "I wonder," he said speculatively, "whether your friend Mr. Armitage could be of any assistance? The merest hint that a Sunday newspaper is interested in your experiences . . . It would make very good reading, I imagine, and Mrs. Massingham's only answer would be to sue the newspaper for libel—a dangerous and expensive course. I am thinking that with this hint delicately conveyed—through some indirect channel, naturally—a settlement out of court may appear distinctly less attractive. The doctor and his lady may very reasonably argue that a successful defense is at least possible, and that an unsuccessful one is at all events no more damaging than a settlement out of court, followed by a public relation of your experiences in the *Sunday Globe*, to which they could only reply by another lawsuit; or, failing that, by guilty silence."

"Oh yes," said Lady Pensard, impulsively laying her hands on the lawyer's desk, "and it's quite true, you know, that Mr. Armitage is frightfully interested already, and is bound to have everything reported very fully in any case. He said it was a first-class story."

"Mrs. Massingham is not bound to know that, however," said Mr.

Mitchison. "Mr. Armitage will be chiefly valuable as a rod in pickle, to be used only in the event of a settlement out of court. A wholesome deterrent, possibly, from that course of action."

"He would do it splendidly, too," said Lady Pensard with enthusiasm, "and the publicity in his paper would never be adverse to *me*. He is a very loyal friend."

"Since you take that view of it," said Mr. Mitchison, "there is no harm in trying. I am bound to insist that you may be disappointed with the financial results, but since these are not your chief object——"

"They are hardly an object at all. What I want to do is to get my own back—morally speaking, of course—and to have this woman punished."

"That being so," said Mr. Mitchison, with a sigh which he quickly converted into a patient smile, "that being so, Lady Pensard, we must set the wheels in motion and see what we can do."

"I think you will find," said Mrs. Britten in a deep voice, breaking her silence for the third time during the interview, "that you can do plenty."

Several months later, at half-past six, to be precise, on a raw spring evening, an old gentleman let himself out of the side entrance of Batley and Briggs, the old-fashioned magic and joke shop which has stood for so many years in a narrow paved alley off High Holborn, between the baker's and the second-hand bookshop. He locked the door carefully, put the key in his pocket, and fastidiously examined and dusted the tips of his gloves. Then he walked round to the front of the shop and looked in at the window.

It is a fascinating window, crowded with a dusty and bewildering assortment of things, and you rarely see it without one or two men and boys worshipping before it. It is a boys' shop first and foremost, but with a universal attraction, and its window reads like a somewhat malicious footnote to human nature. Among the puzzles and amateur conjuring sets, the cards of false noses, clip mustaches and detachable teeth, are crowded together all the diabolical practical jokes that have ever been invented. Explosive cigars, matches which go off with a bang, stink bombs, collapsible knives and forks, rubber rolls which squeak when bitten and unpleasant little chocolate cakes which break the teeth are huddled higgledy-piggledy among packets of itching powder,

sweets made of soap, wineglasses guaranteed to dribble down the shirt-front and rings that run needles into your friends' fingers, making every handshake funny. There are also little boxes of imitation bed bugs ("See Auntie's face when she finds one on the pillow!"), worms, snakes and clockwork beetles, cushions which make rude noises when sat down upon, hideous masks, spoof banknotes, and imitation ink-blots for your friend's tablecloth—all very terrifying and offensive and irresistible. This window never lacks admiring students, and the shop itself does a brisk trade in seasons of good will, such as New Year and Christmas. The confusion of its dressing is deliberate, offering a sort of Aladdin's cave of horror from which every excruciating embarrassment can be plucked at will; and Mr. Morton, the best assistant the shop had ever had, prided himself on the knowing subtlety of this arrangement. There was something for everybody, and the very madness of the muddle tempted one the more. And once in that dark interior, leaning against the counter with one's elbows threatening the pyramids of cardboard boxes and one's head tickled by masks and paper festoons, the prospective customer became his audience, his own, a victim for those salable conjuring tricks which he still, though his hands shook, demonstrated with love, weaving his unforgotten spell of gentlemanly patter.

He looked approvingly over the window, then went on up the alley at an elderly pace. At the corner of High Holborn he stopped to buy an evening paper, crossed the tram-lines with caution, and proceeded up Theobald's Road to the small curtained restaurant where, at the same hour every evening, he ate his supper. He hung up his hat and coat, took off his muffler because of the steamy atmosphere, and sat down to the bill of fare.

In a few minutes the bead curtain at the back divided and the waitress appeared, bringing a smell of suet.

"Nice evening," said Mr. Morton, with an encouraging nod.

"Not bad. There's a bit of a nip in it. Still, the warmer the evenings get the less I shall like it. I got caught in the tube last night, just after the maroons went off. Phew, the *smell*! I'd rather be out in the streets, meself, and take the risk."

"I quite agree with you," said Mr. Morton. "It's far from pleasant. I'll have boiled silverside this evening, I think, and a pot of tea to follow."

"There's a nice toad-in-the-'ole," said the waitress. "Oh, I forgot, you 'ad that yesterday. Well, the beef's all right." She went back through the curtain, intoning: "One-beef-and-veg-one-tea-look-sharp," and Mr. Morton opened his newspaper.

He glanced through the war news with the indifference of habit, studied the cartoon gravely and rustled over the page. Here, at the head of two columns of print, a woman's face arrested him. "Doctor's Wife Accused Of Fraud" said the headline, and under the picture, in inverted commas, was the name "Mrs. Shardiloe."

"Good God," said Morton, moving his paper slightly to make way for the boiled beef and dumplings.

"All right, i'nt it?" said the waitress defensively.

"What? Oh yes, very nice. It was just something in the paper."

"I'm sick of readin' about the war," said the girl, and went away again.

Mr. Morton put on his spectacles and let the beef grow cold while he studied the paper. Mrs. Emma Massingham, he read, of 14, Grasmere Avenue, Muswell Hill, the wife of Dr. Edward Boyd Massingham, had appeared in court that morning as defendant in an action for damages for fraud, and for the recovery of jewelry, money and other articles, obtained from Lady Pensard, of 24, Hertford Street, W.1, widow of the late Sir Percy Pensard, the millionaire biscuit manufacturer. Mrs. Massingham was well known as a medium, under the name of Mrs. Shardiloe, and Mr. Morton read with dismay not untinged by the excitement that Lady Pensard was seeking to recover £700 and a fur coat given in payment for some alleged spirit photographs, which she now claimed were fraudulent. Fashionably dressed women, he read, had crowded to hear the case, and Mrs. Massingham had worn a large hat trimmed with fur and a brown velvet costume. He skipped impatiently over the description of Lady Pensard's apparel, and came to her examination by Sir John Blackley, counsel for the plaintiff.

"'How long ago did your association with Mrs. Massingham begin?'

'Four or five years ago. She was recommended to me as a medium.'

'You were interested in the subject, were you not?'

'Very. I was not very experienced.'

'Was Mrs. Massingham recommended to you by a professional medium?'

'Not exactly. She didn't accept fees. But it was apparently usual for her sitters to give her presents.'

'I see. By what name was she known to you at that time?'

'Mrs. Shardiloe.'

'Do you know now that her real name is Mrs. Massingham?'

'Yes. I discovered that after I had known her for some time.'

'Did she ever offer any explanation of why she used this other name?'

'I believe it was her maiden name, but she gave me no reason for concealing her real one.'

Questioned concerning the presents which she had given to Mrs. Massingham, Lady Pensard said that they had included jewelry, a valuable fur coat, and checks to the extent of over £700.

'Did Mrs. Massingham ever suggest your giving her these presents?'

'If you call broad hints suggestion, yes, she did.' (Laughter.)

'Can you describe this process of hinting to the court?'

'It was most flagrant in the case of the fur coat. We had been discussing the subject of spirit photographs, and Mrs. Shardiloe said she wasn't sure whether she could do them. Then she admired my fur coat and my sister's very pointedly, and said she felt the cold. After that I had one sent to her on approval.'

'And were the spirit photographs, as we will call them, then forthcoming?'

'Oh, immediately.' (Laughter.) Several photographs, including an enlargement, were then handed to the jury, and Sir John Blackley continued his examination.

'What opinion did you form of the results of this so-called spirit photography?'

'I took it in good faith at first. I had no reason to suspect Mrs. Shardiloe, and in any case the first two sittings were failures. The third lot of photographs showed a recognizable head of my nephew, which she said had been made to appear by psychic means. I only began to suspect when I showed them to Mr. Armitage, the editor of the *Globe*. He thought otherwise.'

A photograph was then handed to the witness.

'Do you recognize this photograph?'

'Yes, it is of my nephew.'

'Where did you first see it?'

'Mr. Armitage showed it to me.'

'Do you recognize any similarity between this head and the one appearing in Mrs. Massingham's photograph?'

'They appear to me to be the same.'

Sir John Blackley announced his intention of producing expert evidence on this point."

Here, maddeningly, the report ended, and Mr. Morton folded the newspaper to a convenient size beside his plate and attacked his supper, reading the whole thing through again from beginning to end. "Good lord," he whispered, stirring his tea, "the little fool. So that's what she's been doing . . ." He studied Emma's face on the folded page, a handsome significant face, with the dark hair drawn heavily across the brow under a bandeau, and a mysterious expression. She looked the part all right, he thought. She had enough of her mother in her for that, the bold touch of theatrical imagination, the instinct for appearance. Secretive, too; she had always been that, and clever; the somber and difficult child of the old days, with her dark eyes like a monkey's and her odd air of pathos, was not hard to relate to the mature woman whose hypnotic gaze looked up at him from the paper. But who would have thought she could have gone so far in this foolishness? As a young woman, he remembered, she had been dabbling in it, and there had been some nasty fellow or other whose name he had forgotten; but since losing touch with the Shardiloes all those years ago he had imagined Emma married and settled down, with the dangerous tendencies of youth safely behind her. Was Susan still alive? he wondered: she would be an old woman now: not as old as himself, of course, but well into her sixties. It would be interesting, though perhaps in the circumstances painful, to see her again. If only one could get into court, and hear the rest of the case! Perhaps he could persuade Mr. Batley that it would be a good thing to do, even in the way of business; convince him that there might be a useful trick or two to be picked up from the evidence, an idea for a new joke or deception that might come in useful. In his way, after all, Batley was an imaginative chap and the shop could be left in charge of the boy for an hour or two.

The following afternoon, having talked his employer into believing that there might be a business advantage in following the case, Mr.

Morton went down to the Law Courts and squeezed himself into the crowded back bench from which the public was listening to the progress of *Pensard v. Massingham*. He looked curiously about him. It seemed extraordinary that he should have his first glimpse of Emma after all these years in such surroundings, in this labyrinth of stone corridors and stairs, this stuffy courtroom full of polished wood and unknown faces, among all these strangers. He could not see her at first, but at length, craning over the shoulders of the rows in front of him and picking his way among women's hats and barristers' wigs, he identified an imposing hat as being probably hers. She was sitting very near the front, between two men whom he took to be solicitors, and whose heads bent frequently toward her in whispered conversation. She would not turn round, of course; that would be too much to hope for. Perhaps she would presently be called into the box, and he could see her face. He strained his ears to catch the question and answer being exchanged between the standing counsel and the almost inaudible middle-aged woman in the box.

"Who is this witness?" Mr. Morton whispered to the man beside him.

"Didn't catch the name. Massinghams' charwoman, I think."

"I am suggesting to you, you know," the barrister was saying, "that there was a definite understanding as to what you were to do with the packet."

The woman murmured something, turning to the judge, who paused in his writing and looked at her over his spectacles.

"You must speak up, you know," he said, not unkindly, "and address your replies to the court, not to me. The witness says, Sir John, that she does not understand your question."

"I am very much obliged, my lord. I will endeavor to put it even more clearly. Now, Mrs. Dodge, it is really a simple question, requiring a simple answer. Did you, or did you not, on at least one occasion voice your suspicions concerning this packet to Mrs. Appleyard?"

"Well, not exactly," said the woman cautiously, gripping the edge of the witness-box and then loosing it nervously. "You see, the plates was delivered back by a boy from the photographer's, and the doctor was in the 'all when they come, and 'e took them orf the boy 'imself. 'What's this?' 'e says . . ."

"I don't want you," Sir John Blackley interrupted, lifting his small wig an inch or two off his head and settling it back again, "to tell the

court what Dr. Massingham said, I want you to tell the court what you said to Dr. Massingham, and what you did."

"Well, I took the packet off the doctor."

"Why did you do that?"

"It was addressed to Mrs. Massingham. She was ~~expecting it.~~"

"Had you received any special instructions concerning it?"

"Only to take it to the maid as soon as it come."

"And not on any account to let the doctor see it?"

Mrs. Dodge was silent, looking down at her gloves.

"Come, Mrs. Dodge, you have already told us quite a lot, you know. You told us a few moments ago that you said to the doctor that Mrs. Massingham did not wish him to see the packet, and the reason you gave was that it contained 'something funny.' Did you know what was in the packet?"

"No."

"Didn't you hazard a guess?"

"Pardon?"

"Didn't you, in point of fact, know all about it?"

"'Ow could I? It was nothing to do with me."

"But I received the impression, you know, that it was a great deal to do with you. You have already told us, have you not, that it was part of your duties to return anything you found in the séance room to Mrs. Appleyard, without saying anything to anybody? And this packet, you have just told us, was to be smuggled up in the same way as soon as it arrived? I am suggesting that you knew perfectly well what was going on, and were in Mrs. Massingham's confidence."

"I don't remember," said the charwoman.

Sir John raised his eyebrows at the jury with a long-suffering expression, as if to say: "Need I demonstrate any further what was going on in this house?" Then he shrugged his shoulders and sat down abruptly. Somebody tapped Mrs. Dodge on the arm and beckoned her away.

Mr. Morton listened with close attention to the next witness, a nervous little photographer who was proud of his position as an expert witness and at the same time half-unconscious with fright at finding himself in the box. He had, he said, developed the plates and made the prints in question; had observed the cloudy effects on some and the spirit head on others, and was of the opinion that the plates

had been previously tampered with to produce a "fancy portrait." He had not done the tampering himself, and had never seen Mrs. Massingham; the plates had been brought to him in the ordinary way by a messenger with instructions for developing and printing. The fancy effect, he admitted, was neatly produced, and he himself could have done the same if asked. It could have been done by any skillful photographer. ("Either he's lying," thought Mr. Morton, "or she had two photographers up her sleeve. And I bet the other's somewhere where they won't find him.")

The last witness for the plaintiff was a heavy, spectacled man from the *Sunday Globe*, the expert in the art department who had enlarged the suspect print for Mr. Armitage. His evidence was technical, given in a slow, hesitating voice which Mr. Morton found difficult to catch; the words "half-tone grain" and "photoengraver's screen" were monotonously repeated. This was the man, it appeared, who had found the identical head of Lieutenant Britten on the office files, and he explained that it must have been transferred to the unexposed plate before the last photograph of Mrs. Britten had been taken. This expert evidence closed the case for the plaintiff.

Mr. Waterboy, counsel for the defense, enormously enjoying himself in his first important case and conscious that the newspapers (having done so once) would continue to refer to him as "the brilliant young K.C." if he were only emotional enough, now leaped confidently to his feet, and became angry in a gentlemanly way over the scandalous allegations made against Mrs. Massingham. There was, he said, no human action which could not be maliciously interpreted, and it was unfortunate, nay, tragic, that his client's lifelong and disinterested work for psychic science should after all these years be blown upon by slander. Much had been made out of little, but in point of fact there was not a particle of evidence to sustain the plaintiff's case, as he would presently show. Mrs. Massingham was not a professional medium: she was a doctor's wife in comfortable circumstances who had given years of her life to an important and little-known branch of research: her work had brought comfort to scores of bereaved persons, and had never been questioned even by experts in the psychic field: and in all those years, for all the time and energy so generously given and all the hospitality dispensed, Mrs. Massingham had never asked for a farthing's payment from any of the people who had reason to be grateful to her. The barrister's gentle, eloquent,

almost feminine voice flowed on persuasively. What motive could there be, he asked the jury, for a sudden deception? One might understand the temptation to a professional medium, but Mrs. Massingham was far from being one of these; fraud could bring her no material gain, and could only be unpleasantly dangerous to her reputation and that of her husband. The presents which Lady Pensard had given her in a spirit of gratitude, which was altogether creditable, were in no sense payment; they were symbols of trust and gratitude, and though to a mercenary mind they might, considering the plaintiff's means, appear paltry, Mrs. Massingham had not regarded them in that light. She had accepted them simply as tokens of esteem and faith, pressed on her by a woman for whom she had performed innumerable services. The members of the jury, being men and women of the world (his flattery reminded Mr. Morton of a conjuror's compliments to his audience) would keep an open mind on the question of the photographs until they had heard what the defendant had to say, and in that connection he would be calling expert witnesses. He had little doubt that when they had heard this evidence they would be entirely satisfied with the defendant's story.

Listening to the smooth, faintly indignant voice, Mr. Morton was conscious of the first stirrings of doubt. After all, what would she have gained by it? She was comfortably off, had a sufficient position and respectability as a doctor's wife, and the presents had not been of any really staggering value. What reward could she have expected from so dangerous a folly? All the same, he argued, the photographs must obviously be fakes, and there had been no visible reward in those odd deceptions she had practiced as a child. He had dismissed these as mischief at the time, but had they perhaps been due to something deeper? He moved anxiously in his seat as the counsel's speech drew reassuringly to an end, and the whole court stirred with interest at the calling of Mrs. Massingham.

Emma stepped into the box, raising the little Bible in her gloved hand, and Mr. Morton saw her face for the first time. It was serious and composed and handsome; a calm, compelling face, exquisitely adjusted to the occasion. He smiled involuntarily, admiring her. She glanced gravely at the judge, took the oath in a clear voice, and then rested her hands lightly on the ledge in front of her, gazing at her counsel with an air of gentle and profound attention.

"I want you," said Mr. Waterboy, when the ritual questions were

disposed of, and speaking in a pleased and vindicating voice, "to tell the court something of your history and your psychic experiences. I want you to cast your mind back to the earliest experiences of that nature that you can remember."

"I will do my best," said Emma.

"Thank you. At what age, Mrs. Massingham, were you first conscious of what are best described as supernormal powers?"

"I think I must have been about eleven. But there was a tendency to fall into trance even earlier than that."

"What were the effects of that tendency?"

"It's very difficult to describe. It used to frighten me. It was a sort of sensation of floating away and not being real. I used to fight against it."

"I quite understand. You were too young, perhaps, to account for it in any way?"

"Oh yes. It was not until I was about nineteen that I realized what it was. Then I grew less afraid of it, and the trance became gradually easier."

"Quite so. But were there no incidents in childhood which might have led competent observers to give a psychic explanation?"

"When I was very young there were several mysterious disturbances, but I was too small to understand them. Then, when I was about fourteen, the night before my grandmother died, my dead grandfather appeared to me on the landing of our house. There were several other visions at different times; I couldn't explain them, and was rather afraid of them."

"That is very understandable. Now at what age, Mrs. Massingham, did you come to believe that you possessed mediumistic powers?"

"When I was nineteen, and attended a private séance for the first time."

"Can you tell us what happened?"

"I fell unconsciously into trance, and spoke in another person's voice."

"Did you then pursue this matter of your own accord?"

"No. I was urged to do so by friends, and Mr. Walter Dawes, who is a well-known spiritualist. I was personally rather reluctant."

"We shall hear Mr. Dawes's expert evidence presently. Did you begin your researches as a medium at that time?"

"Yes."

"And you found your powers develop?"

"Yes, gradually. It was a long and often painful progress."

"Did you accept any sort of fee or payment for this work?"

"No, never. Neither then nor since."

"Not even in recent years, when you have given so much of your time to it, and have had a considerable following?"

"Never."

"Why was that? It is quite usual, is it not, for a medium to be paid?"

"I was in no need of money, and in any case I never looked on it as a money-making matter. I felt the subject was too serious and important. I felt that I was capable of performing a service to humanity, and that it was my duty to perform it."

Mr. Morton looked surreptitiously at his watch. He would have to go if he were to take over from the boy and lock up responsibly, as he was bound to do. He sighed with disappointment, taking a long look at Emma. She was behaving splendidly, with just the right blend of dignity and intelligence, and the whole atmosphere of the court seemed to have changed in her favor. He got up reluctantly and pushed his way out to the end of the row, apologizing as he went. Mr. Batley, he hoped, would let him come back for half an hour the following afternoon; it was maddening to be tied to the shop when this crowded court was absorbing all his interest.

The next day, however, Sir John Blackley was well into his stride by the time Mr. Morton squeezed into a small standing space at the back of the court, and he caught only a glimpse of Emma, her face dark and angry, as she turned to say something to the man beside her. There was a lot of whispering, and he sensed that the case was proving a lively one. Dr. Massingham had apparently just been examined, and Mr. Morton rocked anxiously on his bench to achieve a glimpse of Emma's unknown husband. He saw an unremarkable but pleasant-looking man in spectacles, with a touch of professional confidence in his manner, who stood gravely with his hands behind him while he answered Sir John's preliminary questions.

"You are a physician in general practice?"

"I am."

"You practice your profession at a different address from Grasmere Avenue, where you live?"

"Yes."

"Can you explain your reason for doing so?"

"Certainly. My house is inconveniently far from the station."

"I see. Your patients are not, then, among the residents of Muswell Hill?"

"Most of them are."

"How many of them, at a rough estimate, live outside the Muswell Hill district?"

"At the present moment, perhaps a dozen."

"So that only a dozen, among all your patients, would need to use the station?"

"At the moment, yes."

"Have there been more in the past who would find it convenient to use the station?"

"Yes, at different times. The number of patients fluctuates, naturally."

"Naturally. Has the number of your Muswell Hill patients increased or decreased in the last few years?"

"Am I bound to answer that question?"

"Not if you find it embarrassing. Let me put it differently. Would I be right in suggesting that when you adopted a separate professional address, you did so with the idea of enlarging your practice?"

"Eventually, yes."

"Although the majority of your patients lived in Muswell Hill, and would not have benefited from your being near the station?"

Edward smiled.

"Perhaps I was optimistic."

"You had no other reason for changing your address?"

"No."

"You did not, for instance, form the opinion that your wife's known activities as a medium might prove damaging to your professional reputation?"

"No. I have told you my reason for the change of address."

Sir John took off his pince-nez for a better look at Edward, and then put them on again.

"So that, apart from this question of being near the station, for the sake of any patients who might arrive by train from other parts of the country, you had no objection to a medical and a mediumistic practice being carried on under the same roof?"

"My wife is not a professional medium."

"We will come to that presently. Does it not suggest some such apprehension on your part that, from the time of your adopting a separate address for professional purposes, your wife continued her spiritualist activities under another name?"

"It is her own name. She has a perfect right to use it, and did so without any suggestion from me."

"Quite so. You were, then—correct me if I am wrong—in sympathy with these activities?"

"Not entirely. But I thought, and still think, that she had a right to pursue her own interests independently."

"I see. Would you describe yourself as a spiritualist?"

"No."

"You do not share your wife's opinions on this subject?"

"No."

"You would describe yourself, I understand, as a socialist?"

"Yes."

"And a pacifist?"

"I would."

"But not a spiritualist?"

"No."

"It would be no exaggeration, perhaps, to say that you are definitely hostile to spiritualism?"

"Not to spiritualists as individuals."

"But to the movement?"

"I really know very little about it."

"But it must have been very difficult, Dr. Massingham, to know very little about it when your wife has been actively engaged as an amateur medium for the past ten or twelve years."

"And I was also actively engaged as a physician."

"I suggest that you were out of sympathy with Mrs. Massingham's activities because you had very good reason to disapprove their nature?"

"Not at all. I see no reason why husband and wife should not pursue quite opposite interests."

"I see. Then I take it that if you *had* had grounds for suspicion, or disapproval, you would have intimated your suspicion or disapproval to Mrs. Massingham?"

"Naturally."

"You would have given some perfectly clear demonstration of your feelings in the matter?"

"I think so."

"And you do not consider that taking your practice to another address, and even removing your plate from the door of No. 14 Grasmere Avenue, could be taken as evidence of such feelings?"

"Only by a prejudiced person who was determined to put a wrong construction on it."

Sir John paused long enough to let the jury see his incredulous smile, and then bent to inspect his papers.

"Now," he said, straightening himself, "I should like you to tell the court something about this camera which has been referred to in evidence. It is your camera, is it not? You are an amateur of photography?"

"I used to be. I haven't used it for a good many years."

"Did you lend it, in July, 1917, to Mrs. Massingham?"

"I did."

"For what purpose?"

"I believe she wanted to photograph a friend."

"Any particular friend?"

"I understood it was either Lady Pensard or Mrs. Britten."

"Perfectly ordinary photographs? Snapshots, in short?"

"I imagined so."

"Did you see any results of this experiment in photography?"

"No. I didn't think about it again."

"And you were not shown any photographs of Lady Pensard or Mrs. Britten?"

"Not that I remember."

"Not that you remember? You would surely remember, Dr. Massingham, if your wife had shown you photographs possessed of the remarkable qualities we have heard about in evidence? Photographs bearing the likeness of a disembodied spirit?"

"I suppose I should have remembered it if I had seen them."

"Then we are to take it that you did not see them?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Massingham never offered to show them to you?"

"She knew I took no interest in these things."

"Yes, but just reflect for a moment!" The barrister pushed his wig forward over his eyes and looked up at Edward with a testily mocking

expression. "On second thoughts, does it not strike you as odd, to say the least of it, that your wife—your *wife*, remember—should not come running to you with this remarkable achievement, if it were genuine?"

"Not in the circumstances, I think."

"You mean, you would have been all too likely to throw cold water on such an excitement? You would have been skeptical?"

"Possibly."

"I see. And since, as a responsible medical man, you would not be skeptical without good grounds, I take it you *had* those grounds where your wife's mediumship was concerned?"

"I didn't say so," said Edward, with a trace of irritation. "And I don't see that my private opinions can have any bearing on this case."

"Thank you," said Sir John, tossing back the wings of his gown and looking immensely satisfied. "I am most grateful, Dr. Massingham. You have made yourself perfectly clear." He sat down and began to whisper to his junior.

Mr. Morton fidgeted. His time was up, and he dared not risk annoying Mr. Batley by prolonging it. He lingered a moment in the hope that Emma might be called again, but the next witness was a well-dressed, middle-aged man, whom he distastefully recognized as Dawes; he began to push his way toward the nearest exit. A policeman opened the swing door and he went out into the broad corridor, followed by two nondescript men in mackintoshes.

"Not much in it today," said one of them, treading close behind Mr. Morton's heels on the stone stairs, "not worth half a column without a verdict. I thought they'd have got the whole thing finished this afternoon."

"The doctor made a nice mess of it, didn't he?" said the other cheerfully. "I should like to hear what she says to him when he gets home."

"Not forgetting what he says to her," said the first man. "Silly fool, he ought to have given her a good hiding years ago. His practice won't be worth twopence when this case is over. Going back to the office, are you?" They brushed past Mr. Morton and went briskly out onto the steps, dodging past a couple of barristers who were talking outside, and disappeared into the roaring traffic of Fleet Street. Mr. Morton turned to the right and made his slow way in the direction of Kingsway.

"Poor Susan," he thought, "this case will just about kill her, if she's not dead already. Or might she, perhaps, get a kind of excitement out of it? You never can tell; the papers might refer to her in a flattering way, remembering the old days . . . and of course Lady Pensard might lose her case, though it doesn't seem likely . . ." He wished he could have stayed to hear the end of it, for he had more than half a mind to get in touch with the Shardiloes, and the manner of his approach would depend on the verdict. If Emma emerged triumphant he would write a letter of congratulation, and hope that she or her mother would renew their friendship. Muswell Hill was a long way out, but Emma was married to a doctor and looked reasonably prosperous; it would be comforting to have such a house to visit as a change from the shop and his cheerless Clerkenwell lodgings. Yet it was not pure cupboard love, he argued, which prompted him to write; he had been fond of the whole family, and Emma had always been his particular favorite. If she lost the case he would write without hesitation, expressing sympathy, and if the friendship of an old man who had come down in the world were no longer acceptable—well, there was no harm in trying it. He rehearsed alternative letters in his mind for the rest of the evening, preferring first one and then the other, and finally deciding in favor of congratulations, since they would obviously be pleasanter.

The next day's newspaper, however, committed him to the course of friendly sympathy, for the verdict, awarding a triumph to neither side, discredited Emma and made Lady Pensard ridiculous. The judge had made clear his opinion that though Mrs. Massingham was a plain fraud she was not a professional one, and had demanded no payment for the practical jokes she played on other people's credulity. Whether these cruel jokes, he said, had been played with or without her husband's connivance he was unable to say; the jury would draw their own conclusions about the doctor. As to the money which the plaintiff had foolishly spent, the jury must decide whether it had been spent voluntarily, or extorted as a fee. The law had nothing against rich women throwing their money away; it was bound only to protect them against fraud, extortion or breach of contract. Lady Pensard had given Mrs. Massingham a fur coat; she had since regretted this generosity, but was it from Mrs. Massingham's fraud or her own extravagance that she had suffered damage? Could the fur coat and the so-called spirit photographs be regarded as reciprocal parts of a

contract? If so, the plaintiff was entitled to a decision, for the fur coat was clearly what it purported to be, while the photographs were not. On the other hand, if the fur coat were a gift, then the photographs were a gift also, since it was fully established that Mrs. Massingham was not a professional medium but a private person pursuing an unsavory hobby; and although the gift was a malicious one, calculated to deceive—a dirty trick, to use the vulgar phrase—this fact was insufficient grounds for awarding damages. With several acid pleasantries, and more than a hint of impatience with the stupidity of everyone concerned, the judge had made it quite clear that he considered Lady Pensard a fool and Emma a knave; a knave, however, of amateur standing, tolerably within the law.

“Medium’s ‘Dirty Trick,’” said Mr. Morton’s evening paper in an exuberant headline across the page reserved for police-court news, accidents, divorces and anything else that made a nice change from the war. And underneath—“Titled Plaintiff Awarded Farthing Damages.”

While Mr. Morton roughed out his letter on the back of a bill among the dusty muddles of the magic counter, Emma resentfully poured tea in the drawing room of Grasmere Avenue to an uninvited gathering, and Edward handed bread and butter to Tom Shardiloe, Mr. Butler, Lily, and Lily’s two children, Suzanne and Clifford. It was an uncomfortable tea party. Emma was doing her best to conceal resentment, to dominate the company and carry everything off with a high hand; but Lily, stout and opulent and maliciously watchful, was creating an irritating atmosphere of family censure. Sore from their unpleasant experiences in court they had come, as Lily put it, to have it out with Emma, and were not to be put off by any show of hospitality or the presence of the doctor.

“This’ll cost you a pretty penny,” said Tom Shardiloe to Edward, gloomily stirring his tea; “some of those presents from Lady Pensard’ll come in handy.”

“That’s the most scandalous aspect of the whole thing,” said Emma, determined not to accept the role of culprit. “The lies she told! And then to run us into all this expense over a few miserable presents that she simply forced on me. I only accepted them so as not to offend her.”

"I don't call £700 a miserable present," said Lily. "I can only hope, for Edward's sake, that you've still got the money."

"But I never had it! It's the most ridiculous exaggeration. A few small checks, when she wanted to make a gesture and was too lazy to buy anything. I'd have been ashamed, in her position, even to mention it."

"She wasn't too lazy to buy you a fur coat," said Lily. "I suppose you've still got that?"

"Yes, a dreadful thing. I never wear it. As a matter of fact I'd sent it away to be altered."

"So that's where it is," said Lily with a crooked smile. "I couldn't help being amused that you said you'd given it to your sister."

Emma laughed.

"Well, why should I give it back? She gave it me of her own accord. At least I deserve *some* compensation for all this unpleasantness."

"You needn't laugh," said Tom Shardiloe. "It may be funny to you, but it's not to the rest of us. You don't seem to realize. Your mother's been made so ill by the whole thing that I don't know as I really ought to have left her."

"Mother was ill already," said Emma sharply; "you needn't pretend it was any of my doing."

"I'm not pretending anything," said her father; "that's your speciality, my girl, sorry as I am to say it. It's not for you to take this high attitude. That's not what we've come for."

"Then may I ask what you *have* come for?" said Emma; "Edward and I weren't expecting a deputation."

"Oh, *I* was," said Edward unexpectedly. "You've all had a very unpleasant time of it. If you hadn't decided to come I should certainly have asked you."

"That's right," said Mr. Butler heavily, coming out of his lethargy. "Look at the expense, for one thing. Lily having to come up to London and all that, to say nothing of the way people are talking. It's not at all the sort of talk we like, you know, in our business."

"The doctor understands that all right," said Mr. Shardiloe; "he's the one the costs are going to fall on."

"If you're worrying about the farthing damages," said Emma impudently, "they won't present any insuperable difficulty. They were only awarded to show the court's contempt for Lady Pensard."

"The farthing damages isn't what Edward's going to feel," said Tom Shardiloe, "and well you know it. I can make a guess at what the lawyers' fees will be, to say nothing of her ladyship's cost, but we're not concerned with them, nor with what Edward's patients will think, or the damage to his practice. What we've come for is to have it understood, once and for all, that there's to be no more of this silly medium business. I've always been against it, as you know, and now the whole thing's come to a head, far too late, as it happens. It ought to have been put a stop to long ago, and if I'd known where those presents to your mother were coming from, it would have been."

"I see," said Emma. "You've come for a nice family row, haven't you? Is that why you brought the children?" She looked savagely at the tall girl sitting beside Lily, drinking in the scene with timid fascination, and at Clifford, absorbed in his tea and cake.

"Suzanne's not a child," said Lily, "she's twenty, and has a perfect right to listen to what concerns all of us. Clifford needn't worry you either. He's not interested."

"Don't drink with your mouth full, Clifford," said Mr. Butler.

"Well, that's nice," said Emma. "Bring the children into it by all means. I expect they're used to this sort of thing at Brighton."

"Now, please," said Edward a little wearily, "we shall serve no purpose by quarreling."

"No," said Lily, "but that's always her way, isn't it? Play a dirty trick and then make a scene when she's accused of it, and put us all in the wrong. I won't stand any more of it, Emma, and you may as well get that clear from the start. I've suffered more than anybody. Why you should always have had this spite against me, God knows, but I'm not taken in by this attitude of righteous indignation, especially after that disgraceful affair over Leonard . . ."

"Oh, Lily," said her father, "what's the good of raking up the past? A thing that happened all those years ago . . ."

"Ah, but it didn't!" said Lily, her face flushing with anger; "this is something that happened only a year or two ago—just before the war, in fact. I didn't tell you at the time because it made me so angry, and Harry said not to, but it was just another instance of insane spite on Emma's part."

"But it was true," said Emma quietly.

"True!" Lily threw back her head and laughed. "Why didn't he ever answer our letters then? Why didn't he show himself?"

"I suppose," said Emma, "because he'd gone back to Egypt. I told you all I knew."

"Yes! Pretending to have a dream that he was still alive, and back in London! Oh, I know quite well what you did it for. You'd have liked to separate me and Harry and have a thundering good scandal, whereas all you could manage was to worry me nearly to death until I found out it was nothing but invention."

"But I *told* you," said Emma, her voice rising, "I told you, almost at the beginning, that it wasn't really a dream, and had actually happened. I only put it that way at first to try and spare you the shock. How could I have dreamed the address? And Bessie bore me out, didn't she? Every word of it was the truth."

"What *is* all this?" said Mr. Shardiloe irritably; "I don't know what you're talking about."

"No, and I don't suppose Lily cares to explain it," said Emma. "It might prove too awkward." She turned on Mr. Butler. "Why didn't either of you get some inquiries made in Egypt? There can't be so many Lutheran missions out there. It would have been simple enough to find out if I'd spoken the truth."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Mr. Butler uneasily, "Egypt's a big country, you know. If it had been him he'd have come forward all right; that's my opinion."

"Of course it was nothing but lies from beginning to end," said Lily scornfully. "I was a fool ever to write to that address, but I did, didn't I? And back it came after a month or two through the Dead Letter Office. I ought to have known better than to have taken even that much notice of your revelations."

"If he changed his mind about owning you," said Emma, smiling, "that's his affair. It's lucky for you, I imagine, that he did. Perhaps he'll turn up again one day, you never know. It'll be something to look forward to."

Mr. Shardiloe put down his cup with a sigh.

"We aren't getting any further," he said. "What I want, what we all want, is an undertaking from Emma that she'll have nothing more to do with any of this business. Whether there was ever anything in it but pretense I can't say, but it's been made plain enough that there was a lot of things going on that shouldn't have been, and we've all suffered by it. I want her to give us her word."

"Her word!" said Lily, and laughed.

"I don't see that I'm answerable to any of you," said Emma, "I really can't see . . ."

"Oh yes, you are," said Edward. "We had this all out last night, my dear, and there are no two ways about it. I'm partly to blame, I think, for having been so tolerant. I don't believe in dictating to other people, and though I thought, as you know, that the whole thing was nonsense, I hadn't the faintest inkling that it was criminal nonsense. I realize now, bitterly enough, that this case should never have been defended. But at the time—quite apart from your protestations of innocence—it seemed the only possible chance of escape from an ugly situation. God knows how I should have done it, but the money ought to have been raised somehow, even if it had meant selling the practice. I might just as well have sold it, as it turns out, for all the good it is now. And I suppose I was to blame, too, for being taken in by that threat of publicity in the *Sunday Globe*. I knew I couldn't afford a libel action, and I swallowed it." He grimaced, as though the taste were still in his mouth. "And as a consequence, we've had all too sickening a dose of newspaper attention, though in a slightly different form. Why it hasn't shamed you to the ground, and got at least an honest admission out of you, I can't imagine. I'm not going over all this again, but you must clearly understand that I agree with your father."

"So," said Emma, gripping the arms of her chair, "you take their side against me, do you? I might have guessed as much."

"My dear," said Edward patiently, "there's no question of taking sides. You don't realize what a liability you've proved. We're bound to protect ourselves, and you, from your own foolishness. My resources won't stand another affair of this kind, to say nothing of my reputation, which is gone already. I'm under no illusions as to what this ridiculous case has done for *me*. However, you'll suffer from that almost as much as I shall, so I won't lay too much stress on that side of it. But I do insist on your giving an undertaking, to your father and Lily and all of us. It's the least amends you can make after all the damage you've done, and your own best chance as well. Quite frankly, I shall never make a second attempt to protect you."

"Protect me!" cried Emma, her voice angry and distorted now with tears, "that's a mockery if you like! It was your evidence that did me more harm than all the rest put together!"

"If that's true," said Edward, "it was unintentional. I don't think you quite realize my dilemma. Perjury would not have saved *you*, and it would undoubtedly have ruined *me*. To be quite fair, even

without mine Lady Pensard's and Dawes's evidence was quite damaging enough."

"Yes," said Lily triumphantly, "your precious Mr. Dawes didn't come to the rescue, did he? Saying that in his opinion the photographs had been tampered with, and all that pious stuff about being disillusioned! It must have been a nasty shock to have your old confederate turn against you."

"There was a reason for it," said Emma furiously. "He's nothing but a disgusting beast, and all those lies he told were nothing but a filthy revenge because I refused to sleep with him."

"Good gracious," said Lily, raising her eyebrows, "d'you mean to say you hadn't done that already?"

"Lily, *please*," said Mr. Shardiloe. "You know there's been no suggestion of that sort, and I won't have it."

"I suppose he is rather old," said Lily; "still, I must say I always wondered . . ."

"You would wonder," said Emma, "but my views on that subject are rather different from your own. Give me a cigarette, Edward."

"We're getting off the point," said Edward, offering her his case. "We shall do no good by indulging in personal abuse. This interview is already painful enough, and I think we should clear it up as quickly as we can. Emma shall give you her promise, and I will guarantee to the best of my ability that she keeps it."

Emma scornfully blew out a cloud of smoke and said nothing.

"Yes, that's it," said Mr. Shardiloe wearily, passing his hand over his bald head, "that's what her mother and I are insisting on, and Lily too. All this publicity and bandying about of names has been very nasty. If her mother had been well enough she'd have come as well, but as Emma knows, she's been very bad since this case started. I can't help holding Emma responsible. I want to be able to go back and tell her that she's given her word, and that there'll be no more trouble. It isn't much to ask."

"It isn't indeed," said Edward, "and if she won't give you her word I'll give you mine. You needn't worry."

They all looked at Emma, who avoided their gaze and went on smoking rapidly.

"You seem very ready to make promises on my behalf," she said at last. "But not everybody is of your opinion, I assure you. I've already had a number of sympathetic letters from people, begging me not to be discouraged, and to keep on with my work."

"Burn them," said Edward. "Make a clean break and be done with it."

Emma looked from one to the other, as indifferently as she could. They were all watching her; Edward gravely, concealing the anger he had made plain enough in private, her father anxiously, Lily with a mixture of triumph and disdain. Suzanne and Clifford were staring open-mouthed, and only Mr. Butler, dull, boring, common Mr. Butler, had the grace to show some discomfiture and turn away.

There was a knock at the door and Bessie came nervously in.

"There's a gentleman to see you, 'm," she said, and gave Emma a card.

"Tell him to wait in the dining room."

"Very well, 'm." Bessie sidled out again, softly shutting the door. Edward looked at his watch.

"Well, Emma?" he said.

"Well," said Emma, "there's nothing much I can say, is there? If you want a promise you can have it. You've been astonishingly unfair, all of you, but I suppose that doesn't surprise me. I'm not simple enough to expect sympathy or support from my own husband and family; that would be too much to ask. It's obviously useless to expect you to listen to my side of it, and I don't intend to ask you. You don't want the truth, but that's your loss, not mine. I'm not the culprit you all seem to think me, but if you're bent on treating me like a child in disgrace, and extorting a promise to give up my only friends and my sole interest in life—very well. I promise. I shouldn't like any of you to go away unsatisfied."

"You understand, of course, what you're promising?" said Edward. "No more séances, no more spiritualism, real or otherwise; no more communications with Dawes or any of those people; no more 'Mrs. Shardiloe.'"

"You've made it clear enough," said Emma, "and I've given you my word." She dropped her eyes, pleading and folding the visiting card in her fingers.

"That's what we wanted, my dear," said Mr. Shardiloe, getting up, "and there need be no unnecessary hard feelings. If Edward takes my advice he'll give up that separate address of his, and you can both make a fresh start and give people a chance to forget about it." He held out his hand to Emma, and she took it grudgingly. "There now," he said, "let's shake hands all round, so I can go back and tell your mother that we parted friends. Let this be the last word that any of us says on the subject."

The others got up, and there was an awkward pantomime of hand-shakes. Nudged by her husband, Lily went through the performance with rude reluctance. "I don't see that you've any cause to smile," she said viciously, exasperated by Emma's sudden gleam of amusement.

When they had gone, and Edward had banged the front door behind him on his way back to the surgery, Emma powdered her face at the overmantel mirror and went into the dining room. A thick-set man in a brown overcoat got up to meet her.

"Ah, good evening, Mrs. Massingham," he said, "my name's Wilson, Wilson of the *Globe*. I hope I haven't come at an inconvenient moment?"

"Not at all," said Emma graciously. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," said Mr. Wilson, "have you time for a little chat? I should like to talk over a little proposition. You know what it's about, I expect. Our man managed to have a word with you outside the court yesterday, didn't he?"

"Oh yes, the *Globe*," said Emma, affecting vagueness. "Do sit down, Mr. Wilson. Would you care for a drink, perhaps? I'm afraid there doesn't seem to be anything but whisky."

"That'll suit me fine," said Mr. Wilson, sitting down at the table and taking a number of newspapers out of his pockets. Emma took a decanter, a siphon and two glasses from the sideboard and set them in front of him. She sat down and lit a cigarette, gazing at him through the smoke with an inscrutable expression.

"Thanks," said Mr. Wilson; "you're going to join me, I hope? Don't like drinking alone, you know."

"Of course," said Emma, treating him to her mysterious smile. "Thank you so much, not a very strong one. Now we can talk comfortably." Mr. Wilson, she saw, was pleased with his reception; a nice respectable middle-class family man. At any moment he would draw snapshots of the nippers out of his breast pocket and tell her about the garden. "What is this proposition that you want to discuss?"

"Well, you see, Mrs. Massingham, it's like this. Your case has aroused a lot of interest among our readers; sympathetic interest, y'know; they want to hear more about you, and the editor has authorized me to make you a very nice offer for a series of articles."

Emma raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

"Of course, as I dare say you know, the *Globe* always treats these

things in a very dignified way. We make rather a speciality of life stories. I brought one or two along to show you." He spread out two or three loose pages on the table in front of her, black with headlines and spattered with horrifying pictures. "Only well-known people, y'know—actresses and turf celebrities and political figures—only first-class human stories that're in the public eye. Nothing vulgarly sensational."

"Yes?" said Emma.

"Well, we should very much like to run your life story in about three big installments—about five thousand words the first and three thousand the others. Have you got any really good pictures of yourself, Mrs. Massingham? Sort of mysterious-looking ones, I mean, holding a crystal or something?"

"I don't think I have," said Emma, smiling. "I'm not a professional medium, you know."

"Oh, that doesn't make a bit of difference," Mr. Wilson assured her. "You're quite a celebrity at the moment, y'know. It'll all be as dead as a nit in a few weeks' time, but for the next few Sundays they'll be looking for something about you."

"But I thought," said Emma, "—you *are* from the *Globe*, aren't you?—I thought your editor, Mr. Armitage, was very much out of sympathy with spiritualism? He was one of Lady Pensard's chief witnesses. I'm surprised that his paper should want to give me a hearing."

"Now don't misunderstand me," said Mr. Wilson, holding up a hand, "I was coming to that. Naturally, we can't come out strong on the spiritualist side, not after the way the case turned out. That isn't what our readers want. The title we had in mind, Mrs. Massingham, was more on the lines of 'Famous Medium's Confessions.' " He looked at her rather anxiously, his head on one side.

"And what exactly," said Emma, "do you mean by 'confessions'?"

"Well," said Mr. Wilson cautiously, "people like to be mystified, y'know, but they like it even better if you tell 'em how a thing's done. All that stuff with the photographs, for instance. I mean, after the evidence, there's nothing to be gained by saying they weren't fakes, now is there? And there must be lots of other sensational stuff that you can give away—secrets of the séance room and all that, you know the sort of thing I mean."

"You're very frank," said Emma. "What you're asking me to do is to proclaim myself, in three installments, as a fraud."

"Well now, that's not a very nice way to put it," said Mr. Wilson. "It'd be treated in a really nice dignified way, remember. And it's all the better, really, that you're not a professional. I mean, you don't depend on these secrets for a living, do you? After the case, I mean, you can't very well go on with the spiritualist business. So you might as well make a good thing out of blowing the gaff."

"It might surprise you," said Emma, "to know that I've already received at least a dozen letters from sitters expressing the fullest confidence and sympathy, and begging me not to give up my work for the spiritualist movement."

"Oh, bless you, people will believe anything," said Mr. Wilson. "Why, come to that, if you ever wanted to take it up again later on, I bet you five pounds to a box of cigars you'd find the confessions had done you more good than harm. Look at the publicity! Fixes your name in everybody's mind. Soon they'll forget about the case and only remember you as a famous medium. Look at that Mrs. Gibson, for instance, the Birmingham medium. She was mixed up in a much more unsavory case than yours—sicking up cheesecloth and I don't know what all—libel, it was, actually; she'd got no more sense than to sue a newspaper. She lost her case, o' course; they proved her an out-and-out fraud, and if the Crown had taken it up she'd have done time. But has it made any difference? Not a bit of it! A few years afterwards she pops up in Cardiff, doing a roaring trade. And under the same name, mind you! Passes my comprehension, but there you are."

"This is very interesting," said Emma. "Will you have some more whisky?"

"Thanks. Don't let me be the only one; that's right. Well, as I was saying, it can't do you a rap of harm, and you can take it from me, you'll be very pleased with the results. We shall give it a very good play, advertise it well beforehand, y'know, and give it a double-page spread for the first installment. How about coming down to brass tacks, Mrs. Massingham, and talking figures? A nice check would come in handy, wouldn't it, with all those costs?"

"I am not in any need of money," said Emma, fixing him with her deep hypnotic gaze.

"Now, now, don't misunderstand me, Mrs. Massingham. Of course not, I wouldn't suggest it. But a nice windfall's always worth having, isn't it? For a holiday, I mean, or a little nest egg or something of the sort? I wish I had the chance of it, I can tell you!" He looked at her

hopefully with his head on one side, anxious and confiding, a nice kind comforting daddy of a man. Emma smiled.

"You haven't mentioned the size of the nest egg," she said.

"Ah, now we're talking! We are offering you, Mrs. Massingham, signed, sealed and delivered, the sum of one thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds!" said Emma in amazement.

"Well, guineas, then," said Mr. Wilson, mistaking the nature of her surprise. "We don't quarrel over a pound or two, Mrs. Massingham. That's not our policy."

"But," said Emma, instantly taking her cue, "there'd be a great deal of work in it, wouldn't there? I'm not very used to writing; even if I decided to do it I should find it an awful labor."

"That's just where I come in," said Mr. Wilson jovially, patting the papers on the table. "You won't have to put pen to paper, Mrs. Massingham. It'll all be done for you. Just a few little talks with me, and then I'll bring the whole thing back to you and we'll go through every bit of it together. Why," he said proudly, "you don't think all these people wrote their own reminiscences, do you? They couldn't do it in the time, Mrs. Massingham. Stands to reason."

Emma cupped her chin in her hands and looked at him.

"All the same," she said, "considering the nature of the confessions, as you call them, you're asking a great deal of me."

"Twelve-fifty, then," said Mr. Wilson. "There, I can't say more. I couldn't offer you more if you was Mrs. Crippen."

A gleam of amusement came into Emma's face.

"Fifteen hundred," she said boldly.

"Done!" said Mr. Wilson, delightedly producing a folded paper out of his pocket. "You take it from me, Mrs. Massingham, you're doing the wise thing. You won't regret it. It'll be something you'll look back on with satisfaction for the rest of your life. And I may as well tell you, fifteen hundred was the very top figure I was allowed to mention. The absolute limit." He spread out the contract on the table and with a tobacco-stained forefinger indicated the place where Emma was to sign. She hesitated, holding his fountain pen.

"Are you sure it's all right?" she said. "Does my signature make it final? Supposing my husband or my family object?"

"Once you've signed that, Mrs. Massingham, there's nothing they can do. Besides, there'll be nothing objectionable, y'know. It'll all be treated in a very dignified and reverent manner. You'll be surprised at the response you'll get from our readers, really you will."

"Even if they're confessions?" said Emma. "How very curious. But I don't intend going on with my mediumship, you know. In fact, I've given my husband an understanding not to."

"All the more reason, then!" said Mr. Wilson. "Shows good will, doesn't it? Performing a public duty, Mrs. Massingham. He'll respect you for it, believe me. Everybody will."

"Of course," said Emma dreamily, "I suppose it *could* be made quite interesting. It's a remarkable story, I must admit. When I was quite a little girl, you know, I used to think out the most terrifying tricks to play on my grandmother. Ghostly noises and apparitions, you know. They thought the house was haunted . . ."

"That's the stuff!" said Mr. Wilson, rubbing his hands. "There'd be some nice illustrations in that, wouldn't there? 'The Haunted House,' etc. Dress up the page a bit. Get in a few laughs among the sensational stuff. Oh, you leave it to me, Mrs. Massingham!"

"Well, but," said Emma, coming down to earth again, "how are we going to arrange all this? How soon do you want to do it?"

"Advertise it this Sunday, run the first installment the following week. You can give me all the material for the first one tomorrow or the day after, whichever suits."

"You can't come here," said Emma quickly, "I . . . I shouldn't be able to concentrate."

"Right you are, then; could you come down to the office? We can have a nice quiet room to ourselves, and you can put the taxi down on your expenses."

"That would be all right, I think," said Emma, pressing out her cigarette. "I'll come at three o'clock."

"Splendid! It'll be a pleasure to welcome you. And now, if you wouldn't mind signing down here, at the bottom."

Emma bent her head over the paper and began to write.

"It'll be rather a joke on everybody, won't it?" she said, looking up suddenly. "I should like to see some of their faces when they open the paper. The situation has a certain irony."

"You bet it has. Some nice spicy reading, too, when we've got together. That's right, you sign at the bottom of both copies."

"The figure isn't filled in yet, though," said Emma doubtfully.

"No, that's right. I'll do that now, under your very eye. There we are. One—thousand—five—hundred pounds."

"Guineas, I think," said Emma suppressing a smile.

"Guineas it is; you're right," said Mr. Wilson.

Chapter XI

(1930)

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THE TAXI SPUN ALONG THE SEA FRONT FROM THE station, its tires hissing smoothly over the wet road and spurting fans of water out from the wheels. The sun had come out at last, making a steely dazzle on sea and pavement and throwing a watery brightness over the shingle. The promenade was deserted, and Emma, leaning forward to see round the little fringed curtain of the cab, found its clean-washed emptiness forbidding. She had never before seen Brighton in the winter, and its austerity surprised her.

The cab turned smartly into a side street and drew into the curb in front of Butler's Hotel. The driver accepted his fare with a non-committal grunt and whirled off noisily, leaving her on the steps. She looked doubtfully at the polished bell-plate, hesitated, and then walked in slowly through the open door with her bag, determined not to be impressed, but at the same time intimidated by the bright impersonal atmosphere of the hall, the crackling fire, the potted palms, the letter-board stuck full of envelopes, the glass-fronted office window. She had not expected it to look quite so prosperous.

She tapped at the glass window marked "Reception," summoning her confidence, and a dry little elderly woman got up from the office fire and came briskly forward.

"Is Mrs. Butler in? She's expecting me, I believe. Mrs. Massingham."

"Oh yes, Mrs. Massingham. She'll be very glad you've come. We've been expecting you all morning. Would you like to come round into the office for a moment? Or would you prefer the lounge? I'll go and tell her."

Emma went into the office and warmed her hands at the fire, and in a few minutes Lily appeared, self-possessed and important, with a white Pekinese at her heels.

"Hullo," said Lily. "I'm glad you've come. Be quiet, Pansy! You'd

better come through to my sitting room. I've got some sherry for you."

She led the way down a carpeted passage, walking with stilted gait on very high heels and leaving a sweet waft of violets behind her. She was looking extraordinarily well, Emma saw with envy, stout still, but well corseted and flatteringly dressed, with a bunch of violets pinned to the lapel of her suit. Her hair was still golden, and the way she wore it now, short and delicately curly, was attractive, though her face, smooth and calm under its rose-leaf make-up, was no longer young. "She looks," thought Emma, "the sort of woman who would always wear those earrings and those three rows of pearls; a bit overdressed, somehow; though that gray suit's plain enough. It certainly suits her." She followed her sister into a tiny sitting room, littered with newspapers and knitting. A canary was singing noisily in the window, competing against the nasal voice of the radio; there were several miniature aquariums on the window sill, surrounded by potted plants, so that the light came diffused through glass and green begonia leaves, and though the fire burnt cheerfully the room was full of warm and wavering shadows, as though Lily lived and moved in her own aquarium.

She switched off the wireless and gave Emma a glass of sherry and a cigarette.

"This is a nice room," said Emma cautiously, sipping her wine. She would not praise too much.

"Yes, cozy, isn't it? It used to be Harry's private office, and I had the big sitting room upstairs; but now I run everything myself I have to have something on the ground floor. I've turned the other room over to bridge."

"Bridge?"

"Yes, we play every afternoon as a rule. I haven't been able to, of course, since Mother was so bad, but I used to when she first came. She used to be awfully keen on it herself, but she was just a nuisance, poor old dear; I had to keep her out."

"How is she?" said Emma. "Is it really as certain as you said?"

"Oh yes. We thought she was going last Tuesday, but she picked up again. The marvel is she's lasted so long. Of course she doesn't know; she thinks she's going to get better. I suppose that helps."

"I suppose so," said Emma, and sighed. "I wish I could stay longer,

but I've got to get back tomorrow or Saturday because of Edward. I suppose you've no idea when . . . ?"

"One can't tell," said Lily. "Dr. Gregg's been expecting it now for three days. Sometimes she's perfectly lucid and bright for hours on end, and then she goes into a sort of coma. It can't last. After all, you know, she's eighty."

"Will she know me, d'you think? It's all rather horrible, isn't it?"

"Oh, sure to, if you catch her in a good moment. Sometimes you wouldn't know there was anything the matter. I'm rather glad you've come. She hates being left alone for a second when she's awake. It's been trying for me, I can tell you; a hotel isn't a good place for an invalid. It was bad enough when Harry died, and of course he went into a nursing home. People don't like illness about, you know."

"No," said Emma, looking into the fire.

"It would have been better, really, if it'd happened when she was with you. However, it can't be helped. We both had to take the risk. She'd have gone potty all alone in that awful bungalow. Dad wouldn't have been so bad by himself, would he? I always thought he'd outlive her."

Emma lit her cigarette and looked up at her sister.

"Do sit down and tell me all the news," she said. "I needn't go up yet, need I? Tell me who's here and everything. How's Leonard?"

"Oh, he's all right," said Lily, frowning slightly. "He makes himself useful. He helps Miss Briggs with the office work most of the time. It gives him something to do."

"He's settled down all right, then?"

"Oh, my word, yes. I could do with a little less settling down, to tell you the truth. He's a dead weight, really. Still, what can you do? When he turned up after Harry died I was in such a state I couldn't make sensible arrangements. He just hung up his hat, so to speak, and by the time I'd realized he meant to stay it was too late to do anything."

"Well, you couldn't very well turn him out," said Emma. "Do the people here know he's your husband? I mean, he might have been awkward."

"Not he," said Lily, "he hasn't the spirit of a mouse. Have some more sherry? If he'd had the wit of a child unborn he'd have gone to law and got some of that money out of Dawes. I've been at him about it till I'm tired. He just hasn't any push. All he wants to do is mess

about here doing nothing. I don't think he's right in the head, I often tell him so."

"It'd be surprising if he were," said Emma, "considering. Still, couldn't you do something about it yourself? Contest the will, I mean. It ought to be possible."

"Of course it ought," said Lily, "but he'd have to do it himself. I can't do it if he won't even raise a finger. He's absolutely spineless. He's got such a horror of trouble, as he calls it, that I wouldn't trust him not to back out in the middle even if we got a case. And I should have to pay for it all, there's no question. I simply can't afford it, and you never know what kind of a scandal it'd kick up, that'd be bad for business. It makes me mad sometimes. I'd do it if he had an ounce of guts, but there you are; with a jellyfish like that it isn't worth it. The fact of the matter is, he's too damned comfortable here and he knows it. He just won't be bothered. He's made up his mind that he's pretty well off where he is, and nothing will budge him."

She stuck a cigarette irritably into her mouth and sat down with her knees apart, looking at Emma.

"What do people in the hotel think about him?"

"Oh, they like him all right. He makes himself useful all round; I'll give him that. He gets a lot of sympathy from Miss Briggs and the rest—first husband back from the dead and all that kind of thing. They think it's romantic. When I tell them he'd be a rich man if he only got his rights they think I'm talking through my hat. I must say it sounds silly when you look at him. P'raps it is, too. There probably isn't much left since Dawes sold the business and went off to Italy. I suppose you never hear from him?"

"Never. I heard about a year ago that he was living in Florence."

"He does himself well, too, I'll be bound," said Lily bitterly. "A dirty toad if ever there was one. I bet he cleared out pretty quick when he heard Leonard was back. And selling the business like that, too! He must have smelled the slump coming, though, thank God, we haven't felt it yet in Brighton. I thought he was trying to be sharp, selling out like that last year right after the Wall Street crash. He's made a good thing out of us all right, one way and another."

"Especially out of me," said Emma, with a faint smile.

"Well, that was entirely your own fault," said Lily, "if you don't mind me saying so. If ever anybody asked for trouble . . . However,



that's all over and done with, and we won't rake up any old hatches. You made your bed and you look as if you'd been lying in it."

"I suppose you mean I look shabby," said Emma, flushing slightly.

"Not at all. You look very nice. I always liked that stone-marten thing of yours. You've had it remodeled, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Emma, throwing away her cigarette, "I have it disguised as something different every five years. Beggars can't be choosers, as you may have noticed."

"Oh, rubbish, my dear; don't dramatize. I'm sure you don't really want sympathy, so don't put on that famous tragic face. How's Edward, by the way? Is the fatal day fixed?"

"He's going into the nursing home on Sunday night," said Emma.

"Well, don't you worry until the bills come in. My God, they're a pack of thieves! I haven't finished paying for Harry yet."

Emma got up abruptly.

"Shall we go up and see Mother now? Would it be a good moment?"

"Yes, I expect so. Suzanne's been sitting with her all morning, and she sent down just before you came to say she was awake. I'll show you the way."

They went out into the passage together, and Lily laid her hand on Emma's arm.

"My word, you're thin! I thought it must be only your face. You ought to feed up a bit."

"I like being thin," said Emma, looking sideways through her eyelashes at her sister.

"Oh, I know I'm too fat," said Lily cheerfully. "Still, my face hasn't gone like yours, has it? A bit of weight's the lesser of two evils when you come to fifty. Anyhow I don't think I look my age. A friend guessed me at thirty-nine the other day—I had to laugh! I could marry again, too, if it weren't for what we were talking about. I've got a friend who's as keen as anything."

"Well, well," said Emma. "How's Suzanne's baby?"

"Quite well, thank you. She's left it with her in-laws. And life isn't over for me, you know, even if I am a grannie."

They arrived at a room at the back of the first floor, and Lily opened the door.

"Here's your Aunt Emma, Susie," she said in a whisper; "you can come downstairs and give me a hand now, can't you?"

Suzanne got up from her armchair, smiling, and Emma saw with a

pang how pretty she was; as fair and flawless as Lily had ever been, but with a face at once more sensitive, and kinder; in spite of her bright hair and make-up she somehow escaped her mother's smooth vulgarity.

"Hullo, Aunt Emma," she said quietly. "Grannie's pining to see you. She's simply marvelous at the moment, so I'll leave you together and come back presently. Just ring if you want anything."

The door closed behind her and Emma stood still, nerving her shaken heart for this last encounter. She was too heavy and anxious about Edward, too vulnerable to face the idea of death with courage. She found herself wishing miserably that it were over.

"Darling?" said Mrs. Shardiloe's voice from the bed; "is it you, Emma?"

Emma went quickly to the bedside and kissed her mother's cheek.

"Yes, it's me, Mother. I'd have come sooner, if only . . . How are you, darling?" She looked at her mother's face with sudden anguish. She had not expected to be moved like this, but her heart perhaps had feared it all along; she had dreaded the meeting. Now she was both hurt and comforted by what she saw, for the transparency of death, so pitifully obvious in her mother's face, was disguised by a deathless vanity which reassured her. The shrunk head and throat were swathed in a pearly chiffon, and on each cheekbone, so ivory-clear now and beautiful in structure, was a petal of pink rouge. Emma's eyes filled with tears and she took her mother's pallid hands and pressed them.

"I'm a little better, I think," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "I have my ups and downs, you know, but I'm fairly comfortable on the whole. The doctor gives me some nice stuff and I sleep a good deal. Do I look very ghastly?"

"No, you look beautiful," said Emma, sitting down beside her. "That soft thing round your face suits you."

"Does it? My hair's so thin, you know, and my face is such a sight. Suzanne's very kind; she arranges me. Lily thinks it's foolish to put on a little color and that, but it cheers me up. Suzanne does it for me. She's a nice girl, Emma. She plays the gramophone to me by the hour; I like it better than the wireless."

"I'm glad you've got her," said Emma; "I wish I could stay longer myself, but I've got to go back because of Edward. I'll come back again next week."

"Oh, do. Tell me how Edward is? I've been so worried about him."

"I will; but is it all right for you to talk?"

"Oh yes, dear. I'm really ever so much better. It does me good to see you; though you're awfully thin, Em, I can see that."

"Not more than usual," said Emma, "it's this hat, I think. Well, I was going to tell you about Edward. They're going to operate on Monday; he's going into the nursing home on Sunday evening. They seem to think it's that old injury he got four years ago, in the general strike. It's bothered him a lot lately."

"Oh, my dear, why will he do it? He just burns himself up, all to no purpose. Can't you stop him?"

"I do my best, but he's very obstinate. There's nothing I can say." Emma's eyes filled weakly again and she turned away her head. Mrs. Shardiloe touched her wrist.

"Are you happy, Em?" she said. "I often wonder."

"Oh yes," said Emma, fumbling for a handkerchief. "I shouldn't mind so much if I weren't, should I? If I was like Lily, I mean. I don't think she feels anything."

Mrs. Shardiloe closed her eyes for a moment, breathing lightly.

"I'm glad you're happy," she said at last, gazing at Emma and stroking her hand with dry fingers. "You've not had an easy time of it, have you? Is there any more of that trouble . . . that girl?"

"No, not now. He hasn't seen her for a long time. I think he's got over it; I hope so, I'm sure. I've never asked him what became of her."

"You were very forgiving," said Mrs. Shardiloe.

"I suppose some people would think so. I may have been wrong all the same. I don't know. I just couldn't let him go. It was so tragic for me, coming after all that trouble; we were settling down so well together, better than we'd ever been. It was a frightful shock. I can see now that he had lots of excuses, but I couldn't at the time, and I just couldn't bear to let them walk off together."

"But did it ever come to that?"

"Oh yes. I could have borne it, I think, if he'd just had an affair with her and said nothing; but being Edward he had to tell me the whole thing, rather like a committee meeting, and more or less asked for my blessing and a divorce."

"But I thought doctors didn't get divorced? What about his practice?"

"Oh, that doesn't amount to much nowadays. We're very hard up, you know. He gets jobs as a locum in the summer, and he's got the

medical correspondent thing with the *Evening Echo*, but it comes to very little. His own patients can be counted on the fingers of one hand; he still spends most of his time fussing with politics."

"What a pity," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "what a sad, sad pity."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Emma, sniffing; "it suits us quite well, really. We were settling down to it rather cheerfully when that girl came along. She spoiled everything for the time being. Just imagine, Mother, she was only twenty-five!"

"And pretty, I suppose?"

"No, not very. I didn't think so, anyhow. I expect she was rather nice really, though I couldn't be expected to see it. He met her through some political work or other, and I suppose they thought that between the two of them they could reform the world. It was so funny of Edward, thinking I should see it like that."

"Men are so stupid."

"Yes, he was amazed when he found out how much I minded. He thought, you see, that we'd gone our own ways so long that it couldn't matter. Whereas really I was only beginning to appreciate him, and was thinking how happily we were getting on at last. When he realized that, it sort of paralyzed him, I think. It wasn't so much that I wouldn't hear of a divorce, it was finding out how much it mattered to me. I think now that he behaved rather nobly, though I don't suppose *she* thought so. Anyhow, after a time and a certain amount of fuss she just faded out."

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Shardiloe faintly, "she must have been a dreadful person; he's well rid of her. Still, I suppose at the time he felt he'd had a lot to put up with."

"Well, he had," said Emma. "We both had, if you think of it, but Edward came off worst. I could kick myself when I think of some of the things I've done. It was that stupid business with the Sunday paper that he couldn't forgive. However, it's no good crying over spilled milk. I was so angry, I wanted to have the last word on everybody."

"Oh, I *liked* it, dear," said Mrs. Shardiloe. "It was very naughty, of course, not saying anything to Edward, but I thought it was rather brave of you. So amusing, too, all those bits about when you were a little girl, and we thought the house was haunted. I've laughed over it many a time. I cut the articles out of the paper and I've still got them somewhere." Her hands wandered vaguely over the coverlet. "That

was a horrible photograph of you, though, the one with the crystal. It didn't do you justice, Em; you're better-looking than that, even now."

Emma smiled. "We're none of us a patch on you," she said, "not even Suzanne," and watched while her mother sighed and closed her eyes, the lines of her face settling with grotesque delicacy within the chiffon frame. "We've so much in common," she thought, sitting with her hands in her lap and staring in front of her; "at bed-rock my vanity is hers, only hers is stronger. Hers is keeping her alive, even now, while mine has only betrayed me at every turn." She sighed, thinking, "I wish it were over," and looked cautiously at the clock. Presently Mrs. Shardiloe opened her eyes.

"Are you still there, Em?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Did you go and see Majo for me? You said you'd try."

"I did. I went to the home about ten days ago. He seemed very comfortable. He sent his love to you, and asked me to thank you again for all you've done, getting him in. There's always a rush for vacancies, and he said without those letters from the theater people he wouldn't have stood a chance. He seemed very grateful."

"I'm glad," said Mrs. Shardiloe, "I'm glad."

"I thought he looked wonderful," said Emma, "considering his age. He told me he was eighty-seven last birthday, but you'd never think it. His hair's quite lovely still, so thick and white, and they keep him beautifully clean. He just potters about and sits by the fire and talks to the other old music-hall people. The matron said he was a great favorite with them all, and that he seemed very happy. She said they'd miss him more than anyone, if anything should happen. Of course he's very frail."

"He's a dear creature," said Mrs. Shardiloe, and smiled, looking vaguely at Emma. Presently a thought disturbed her and her gaze wandered.

"Is that door shut?"

"It is. Is there anything you want?"

"I wanted to ask you something, only . . . I didn't want *her* listening. She thinks I'm a stupid old woman; it's not kind, is it?" The blue eyes, watery and anxious, were fixed on Emma.

"Lily's downstairs, she can't hear."

"It's just that I wanted to ask you about . . . all that. You know what I mean. It frightens me when I think of it, Em; I've never known

what to believe. You said in that paper it was all pretense . . . but is that true? I don't want to blame you, dear, I just want to know, because . . . I've been very ill, you know," she finished weakly.

Emma sat gazing at her miserably, unable to speak. Edward had said . . . but then how could Edward know, any more than herself? And he was wrong, wrong; the necessity of comfort was a thing beyond him. One couldn't set his cheerless standards before a dying woman.

"I'll tell you what I think," she said, and swallowed. "I think . . . that there's another life, all right. Death is only an incident. It's a thing we all go through, and . . . and emerge again, somehow. I'm sure of that."

Her mother looked at her steadily for a moment, then turned her head weakly sideways on the pillow.

"But what is it *like*?" she said querulously. "I lie here, wondering . . . Life gets so shabby when you're old. If it just goes on and on . . ."

Emma took her hand and stroked it, searching for something to say.

"Think of it," she said, "as a sleep, from which we wake refreshed. Refreshed and young, perhaps, to something better."

"Young," said Mrs. Shardiloe in a whisper, "if I thought that . . . It's growing old that's the cruelty, the way everything changes. It's the waiting that's so awful. I've never been a religious woman; if I could only be sure . . ."

"You *can* be sure," said Emma in a suffocating voice. "I've had proofs, I swear I have; it wasn't all pretense. I know in my heart that what I've said is true." She had an impulse to drop her mother's hand, but she sat still, gazing at the wall. It would soon be over. Mrs. Shardiloe had closed her eyes again, and the room was quiet. She became aware of the effort of her mother's breathing.

The door opened gently and Suzanne looked in.

"Asleep?" she whispered.

Emma shook her head.

"I think she is," said Suzanne, coming close to the bed. "You go down now, Aunt Emma; lunch is ready. I'll sit with her for a bit."

Emma nodded and got up quietly. Mrs. Shardiloe did not move, but lay sunk in her chiffon scarf, her mouth open.

"She'll sleep for hours, I expect," said Suzanne in a whisper. "They give her something."

Emma went downstairs to Lily's sitting room, where lunch had

been laid for three on a table in the window. Lily looked up from her knitting.

"Well," she said, "how'd you get on? Depressing, isn't it?"

"Terribly," said Emma, sitting down with a sigh. "I wish it were over."

"So do we all," said Lily. "It soon will be, I expect. If the doctor had any sense he'd give her something."

"She seems so terribly afraid of dying," said Emma, "that's the upsetting thing."

"I know, isn't it queer? I should have thought at that age . . . However, I'm sure you were able to tell her something comforting."

Emma caught a glint of the old malice and looked away.

"I'm not in the frame of mind to be much comfort to anybody," she said, "I'm too worried."

"What, about Edward?"

"Yes, I expect it'll be all right, but it's being alone I dread. The flat's so depressing, and then on top of all this . . ."

"Why don't you let Suzanne go back with you?" said Lily, not unkindly. "She wants to see Clifford in town before she goes back to Coventry. It'd be company for you."

"Oh, do you think she would? It won't be very cheerful for her, I'm afraid. Still, she could have Edward's room. It would be nice not to be alone at night."

"I expect she'd like it," said Lily. "She's an awfully cheerful soul, and it'd save going to a hotel. She'd be out shopping most of the day, probably, but you'd have her in the evening."

"I think I'll ask her," said Emma, glancing at the table; "is she coming down to lunch?"

"No, that's for Leonard. He didn't particularly want to meet you, but I told him not to be silly."

"Oh?" said Emma, refusing to look hurt. She sat still, bracing herself against the coming thrust.

"Oh well, he's very funny, you know," said Lily. "He hates meeting people, especially when he thinks it's going to be uncomfortable. I told him about those spirit messages of yours, you know. He didn't like it a bit. I told him you were a reformed character now and all that, but he said some awfully nasty things. However," she said, getting up with an appearance of great cheerfulness as she caught

sight of Leonard hesitating in the doorway, "I don't bear malice, I told him. On the contrary, I find it all rather amusing."

On the journey back to London, shaken by her mother's death and her own forebodings, Emma was grateful for the subdued cheerfulness of Suzanne's company and made an effort to listen to her conversation. Suzanne bought an armful of Sunday newspapers and ordered tea, talking tirelessly across the rattling teacups in the crowded Pullman. Her husband, her baby, Clifford's job, his lodgings, the girl he was going about with . . . Emma listened to the long account with vague attention, smiling and nodding whenever Suzanne paused and seemed to expect an answer, but surreptitiously watching the window for the first suburbs. The train would get in at six and Edward had arranged to go, he had said, at eight. They would have perhaps an hour and a half together.

Clifford met them at Victoria and he and Suzanne went off together in a taxi. Emma took Suzanne's luggage and her own and drove to Bernard Street, making a last effort to shake off depression before she reached the flat. It was a wet evening, and the taxi proceeded cautiously through the Bloomsbury squares, sharpening her impatience. She sat forward on the seat, craning for a rewarding glimpse of the flat familiar row of cheap hotels, the tobacconist's on the corner, the tube station. . . . She opened the door before the taxi had stopped, and held it against the inrush of fine rain.

"Hullo," said Edward, opening the painted door at the top of the stairs, "how quick you've been. I heard the door slam downstairs, but I thought it couldn't be you."

"Oh, the taxi *crawled*," said Emma, giving him a kiss. "I thought I'd never get home. Are you all right?"

"Perfectly," said Edward, adjusting his spectacles; "busy, too. I've been getting a sort of meal together in the kitchen; I thought you might like something. Has it been very awful?"

"Oh, terribly depressing. I wanted to come home all the time, and yet I couldn't leave. Suzanne's come back with me; that's her bag. She's going to keep me company for a day or two."

"What an excellent idea. What have you done with her?"

"She's gone off to have dinner with Clifford. I thought it would be nice to have a bit of time to ourselves."

She followed Edward into the kitchen, pulling off her hat and



coat. The little room was hot and bright; the gas griller was full on and there was a smell of coffee.

"It's only sausages," said Edward, busy at the gas stove. "I couldn't think what else to get, being Sunday. Mrs. Duffy got them from the delicatessen before she went home."

"Lovely," said Emma, sitting down at the table, touched by the frenzy of untidiness with which Edward had set the cloth. Everything touched her too deeply now that she was home; her heart winced at trivial and ordinary things; she was too vulnerable.

"There," said Edward, setting the coffee pot before her. "D'you feel like telling me about it, or are you tired? Would you say those sausages are done, by the way? They look a bit pink."

"They're perfect," said Emma. "I'm hungry, too, I don't know why. It's the relief of getting back home, I think, and seeing you again."

"Emotion always gives one an appetite," said Edward approvingly. "Afterwards, anyhow. I suppose that's why they always have food at funerals. Have you got to go back for that?"

"No, of course not. I shall stay here with you. Lily won't want any support, and there's nobody else to worry about. I came away as soon as I decently could. I was terrified it wouldn't be over before you'd gone; I shouldn't have stayed any longer in any case."

"That's nice of you," said Edward, with his comforting smile. They ate and drank together in familiar silence.

"Darling, I'm glad to see you," exclaimed Emma at last. "Deathbeds are terrifying, aren't they? They upset one out of all proportion, and all one's cheerful arguments dwindle and disappear. I've come back feeling tearful and miserable and nervy and everything you don't like, and that's sad because I wanted to give you a cheerful send-off, and now I shall probably cry before we've finished supper."

"My poor girl," said Edward, his spectacles glinting at her across the table; "you've had a horrible time. Try and remember that it's all over; as much over as if it had never been."

"Oh, it's not *that*," said Emma, "it's you I'm worrying about. I can't help it. And I meant to be so bright and matter of fact, not a bit like this."

"I shall give you a drink in a minute," said Edward; "we can be as bright and matter of fact as anything over a bottle of whisky. What

time's Suzanne coming in? It's not very cheerful for you, being here alone."

"I shall come to the nursing home with you."

"No, don't do that. I'd much rather you didn't. I'd much rather think of you sitting cosily by the fire, not skidding about in a taxi on a night like this."

("Why doesn't he tell me not to fuss?" thought Emma. "I believe he's frightened too, he's as aware as I am . . .") She pushed away her plate.

"Let's go into the other room," she said, "I'm not hungry any more." They took glasses from the kitchen cupboard and went into the sitting room.

"By the way," said Edward casually, "I wrote out one or two addresses that you might need. You probably won't, but they're here, just inside the blotter." Emma looked up quickly from the hearth-rug, where she was kneeling on a cushion.

"What sort of addresses?"

"Just a solicitor, and one or two other things. They might come in useful if you wanted to arrange anything." Seeing her altered face he came slowly across the room and sat down in the armchair above her, drawing her across from her crouching posture so that she rested against his knees. "Darling, you mustn't get in a panic because I attend to these ordinary details. It's only common sense. I don't anticipate anything of the kind, but I'm bound to consider every possibility, and be prepared for it. It's tiresome, but you mustn't be frightened."

"How can I help it?" said Emma. "It's been haunting me all day. I can't pretend, like you can, though I did mean to try."

"Well, don't pretend then," said Edward, stroking her shoulder; "there's nothing gained by observing unnatural conventions, least of all between ourselves. I should even feel happier myself if we could talk quite frankly; that is, if you can bear it. I wish you hadn't had all this business with your mother to go through first: it's made you more apprehensive than you need be. It's a great pity."

"You're apprehensive, too," said Emma, "I can feel it."

"Only on your account. It couldn't matter to me otherwise, could it, one way or the other? I don't mind about it like you do. It doesn't appall me."

"I know why you say that," said Emma, staring into the fire. "It hurts me to know it, but it's true—isn't it?—that you wouldn't really

mind. I haven't forgotten those terrible things you once said, about everything having failed. And I haven't made it up to you in any way; I know that too." She began to cry, but silently, letting the tears gather and fall unheeded.

"My dear," said Edward, "it's a pity that one ever says such things; they're always remembered afterwards at the wounding moment. I'd unsay them if I could."

"But they'd still be true," said Emma, "wouldn't they?"

"Oh, they'd still be true, perhaps, but it matters less than one thinks. One's only conscious, in moments of great clearness like the present, of regret for stupid mistakes and for time wasted. One gains experience too late to be of any use; that's my only real objection to the arrangement."

"That's true," said Emma, and turned to search his face. "If we could only go back twenty years. . . . It's I who've wasted so much time, not you. If we could have our time over again it could be so very different."

"People always think that," said Edward, "but they'd probably do precisely the same again, unless they carried their experience backwards, which wouldn't be allowed. We should live identical lives again, you'd find, and arrive at this same point at this same moment."

"I wouldn't miss this moment," she said, "miserable though I am. I only wish I could have had it a lot sooner. I could have made things better for you in so many ways."

Edward smiled.

"We weren't going to reproach each other," he said. "These last few years haven't been unhappy, have they? And the beginning was fun. It was only in the middle that we got so badly out of tune, and that's all done with now. When I come back we shall laugh at ourselves for being so solemn this evening."

"I hope we shall, but at least I shan't regret it. It's a good thing to be solemn sometimes, and ask the important questions one really wants answered. We cover them up so much as a general rule, and are too polite about them or too frightened, I don't know which."

"That's an unusual sentiment, from you," said Edward, touching her cheek; "you used to want to cover things up all the time. I never knew anyone who went in for so much mental upholstery."

Emma shook her head.

"I know," she said; "I still want to, but I fight against it. I want

to be like you in some ways, but just keep enough of myself to soften down the edges. I want to ask you if you ever see Nancy any more, for instance, and at the same time I'm afraid of too much candor."

"You needn't be," said Edward. "I haven't—not for a long time."

"Doesn't she even write to you?"

"Not now."

"Don't you know what's happened to her, or where she is?"

"No. I don't inquire."

Emma pushed the hair up from her forehead with a puzzled gesture.

"I often wonder," she said, "if you regretted . . . how it all turned out. I may have been wrong, you see. It had such a curiously awakening effect on me that at the time I couldn't see anything else, but for you it may have been quite different. You may have been regretting it all this time, and not saying anything."

Edward moved restlessly in his chair, and took out his pipe.

"I thought you knew," he said at last, "that I didn't regret it. I've tried to make that clear, my dear; I didn't want there to be any doubt. At the time, you know, it seemed the best solution. There we were, with such differences between us, such an opposite way of thought . . . it seemed insuperable; and of course the emotions of the time clouded one's judgment. It didn't seem possible, then, that we could have readjusted ourselves so well, even when we'd been so thoroughly shaken off our respective bases. Or at least, that *you* could have made so complete a readjustment, for I don't think I've altered, much. It's you who made the really vital change, and at the time, if you remember, there was no way of seeing that."

"No," said Emma; "or perhaps I haven't changed as much as you think. It was just that I suddenly realized I was losing you; that's the simple truth. It somehow had never occurred to me that you'd really go, and that I'd be alone. And after you'd gone there'd have been nothing left, would there? Everything had crumbled. It gave me such a fright that I'd have changed myself into anything to prevent it. It was just selfishness, in a way. It's been worth it for me, but I've often wondered if you harbored any resentment."

"Have I seemed resentful?" said Edward. "No, no, I've never been that. There was much that you could have blamed me with, and you didn't. We both had to make a compromise, people usually do at some point in the life that they live together; and it's worked very well on the whole, hasn't it? We each gave up something that the

other hated, and both of us probably at the time regretted our own." He leaned away from her to light his pipe, and Emma watched the flame sucked down and released alternately at the mouth of the bowl. "I've often wondered," he said, throwing away the match, "whether you've ever hankered to go back to that business. I hope you haven't, but you're such a secretive soul; I've no real means of telling. It wouldn't have been possible, of course, after that famous Sunday-paper incident that we quarreled so about, but I've wondered all the same."

Emma smiled at him for a moment and then looked serious.

"That famous Sunday-paper incident, as you call it, didn't have quite the effect that one might have supposed. You may not believe it, but I still get letters occasionally, even now, from people who want me to take it up again, and I had dozens at the time."

"I can believe it without any effort at all," said Edward; "there's absolutely no limit to human credulity."

"Well, that's not quite fair," said Emma. "Because one makes a confession of some things, it doesn't necessarily follow that one's guilty in everything. I don't think there's ever been a medium who hasn't done something deliberate at some time or other, when the power failed. It doesn't prove that the power doesn't exist, but only that it's erratic. Doctors do the same thing, don't they, when they're in doubt? They pretend to be infallible because if they confessed their ignorance their patients would lose their faith."

"My dear, honest ones don't."

"But how many honest doctors are there? Honest, I mean, to the extent of never practicing a little harmless deception? You know that you've often said that a bottle of useless tonic works wonders in some cases, and the patient cures himself by faith."

"Yes, but there's a special name for physicians who do that *all* the time. We call them quacks. We don't think very highly of them."

"But I've often heard you say," she persisted, "that nearly every quack had at least some good in him. You've often said that the attitude of the medical profession was nine-tenths prejudice."

"That's true, but when I've said so I was judging by results. A quack who produces results has something to be said for him."

"Exactly," said Emma, "and I produced results too, didn't I? There was something in me, as there is in the quack, and it gave people comfort, as the quack by unorthodox methods gives them health."

"You're not suggesting, though," said Edward with a smile, "that it was all done out of the purest philanthropy? The quack, after all, does it for the sake of his pocket, and you did it, apparently, for the sake of something in your nature which I've never quite fathomed. Or did you really see yourself as perfectly disinterested, a sort of universal comforter?"

"You may smile," said Emma, evading the question, "but people need to be comforted just the same. Even Mother wanted to be convinced in the end that it was all true. She'd have had a happier death if she could have believed it completely. I tried to convince her, but I don't know whether I succeeded. I think it was too late. After all, what harm does it do? It may be true, and if it isn't, you never have the pain of discovering your mistake."

"There's a certain logic in that, I suppose," said Edward. "At least it hasn't the disadvantage of the ascetic religions, which urge one to have as nasty a time as possible in this world in order to enjoy endless banquets in the next. I've often felt sorry for their followers because, though they don't find out that the banquets are never served, they've spent their lives working up an infernal appetite. Spiritualism at least gives them plenty of titbits on the way, and doesn't make a point of discomfort or self-denial. Perhaps that's why it's so popular."

Emma gave his knees an affectionate pressure.

"You'll never meet me halfway, will you?" she said; "but everybody isn't as confident as you are. You're like those extraordinary people who never feel the cold; but the rest of us would perish without our wrappings."

"You wouldn't," said Edward, fanning away his pipe smoke from her face, "you'd get hardy. You've cast those particular clouts, I hope, for good. You've been a much healthier person since you got rid of them, haven't you now? Admit it."

"I suppose so, in some ways. But then I've got you instead. If I hadn't, my darling, I'd still be afraid of the cold." They both gazed at the fire for a time without speaking, thinking their different thoughts.

"Don't go back to it," said Edward at length, "whatever happens."

"I shouldn't need to," said Emma in a low voice. "I couldn't endure to be alone; I've made up my mind about that. I should do away with myself rather than endure it."

Edward gave her shoulder a little shake.

"My dear girl, what nonsense you talk. This is pure drama. Whoever said that you were going to be alone? Thousands of people go into nursing homes every day, and thousands come out again."

"I know," she said, laying her cheek against his knee. "I warned you that I felt miserable and morbid. The thought's been haunting me all day like a premonition."

"Shake it off, then. Remember how badly your premonitions have turned out in the past. I never had any respect for them."

"I suppose you're right. I'm not saying any of the things I meant to say. Don't look at the clock. It can't be time to go."

"I must in a minute. I said I'd be there by half-past eight, and I've still got to finish packing my bag. Supposing you come and help me?"

"I can't bear to move. So long as we sit here together, it hasn't begun. I can almost pretend that it hasn't got to, while we sit here like this."

Edward stroked her hair with a caressing hand, then leaned forward abruptly and knocked out his pipe.

"But the longer we sit here together," he said, "the more you'll work yourself up. And it isn't a bit necessary, darling, do take my word for it. See how much better you'll feel while you're helping me to pack. We've both worked ourselves into a melancholy frame of mind, and now we're only prolonging it." He got up from the chair with a grunt and gave Emma his hand. "There, that's better. Look, you didn't even drink your whisky; have it now. You'll feel a new woman when you've got that inside you."

Emma drank obediently, smiling at him over the glass, and with an effort at cheerfulness followed him into the bedroom. Its disorder struck her with a premonitory chill. That was how it would look, then—drawers open, wardrobe gaping, papers and handkerchiefs littered over the bed—when she returned without him, to tidy up. Already she saw herself standing dejected and alone, dismayed by the intolerable emptiness of his disorder.

"Do you really want to take all these papers with you? I'm sure you'll never read them."

"Yes, I shall. They've been hanging over me a hell of a time. Bed's just the place for catching up with arrears."

"They look so dull, though; reports and things. Why don't you leave them behind for once, and read something interesting?"

"But they *are* interesting to me; Ethel M. Dell and Sexton Blake rolled into one. Put them in, there's a good girl."

Emma finished packing the bag, not daring to look too familiarly at anything she put in. The touch of sponge-bag and dressing gown had power to wound her; the most ordinary action became unbearable when one did it for the last time.

She fastened the locks quietly and took the bag into the hall. Edward had gone back into the sitting room and was rustling at his desk. Presently she heard the telephone tinkle and knew that he must be calling for a taxi. She stood in an apathy, her hands at her sides, thinking of nothing.

"There we are, then," said Edward cheerfully, coming into the hall. "I don't think I've forgotten anything." He took his overcoat from its peg and heaved it on, looking about for his hat and feeling in the pockets for his gloves. Emma noticed with a far-away surprise how gray he was, and round-shouldered.

"Well," he said, looking at her, "off I go, then."

She awoke out of her numb staring and put her arms round his neck, pressing her cheek against his. He clasped her kindly and for a long moment they stood still together, not moving until an infinitesimal sense of strain told her that he was anxious to be gone. Then she dropped her arms and opened the door, awkwardly smiling.

"They'll let you know tomorrow," he said, "when it's all over. I'll make them promise to let you come in the afternoon, or anyway the next morning. Would it be a nuisance to bring any letters with you? And don't let Suzanne leave you alone all the time. Go out with her while you've got the chance and enjoy yourself."

They kissed again, lightly this time, and Edward went down the uncarpeted stairs with his careless tread, putting on his hat as he went. At the landing he turned and waved his hand, and she caught his old assuring smile and the blind flash of his spectacles.

With the gas stove out the kitchen had grown cold again, ugly and desolate under the electric light; she looked at the crumby table with a shiver of fear. So it had begun: and she was here alone in the kitchen, stared at by the dirty cups and plates, the empty sink with the stain of coffee on it, the gas stove exhaling its cooling unpleasant breath. Mechanically she put on a pinafore and began to clear away. So long as one moved about and employed one's hands, so long as



the plates could be clattered together and the geyser spurted and coughed its hot water into the sink, thought could be paralyzed and held at a distance; there was a spurious comfort to be drawn from going through those motions which habit had made familiar, steady-ing because they somehow suggested continuance, an unbroken progress which nothing could ever change. There was something hypnotic in the splashing of water in the bowl, a soothing quality in the slippery warmth of the wet china that was as grateful as a drug. She breathed deeply, inhaling the gas and steam.

That was how one did it with gas, of course. One turned on the tap and breathed and breathed, and after a time one slid away on the edge of a turntable, as one did at the dentist's, revolving with gathering speed over vague country, and every time one passed the original point, somewhere close at one's ear, they struck a gong. It took only a few seconds to lose consciousness, and then, once the gong had become muffled and one had swung off safely into the deeper fog, it was as good as death. Death could overtake one slowly, like a tide, and one would never know. One had made one's final refusal to submit to life, and there was no more to be said.

Emma paused in her washing up, and resting her hands on the edge of the sink closed her eyes and drew a long breath deep into her lungs, imagining the taste of gas in her nostrils, and the knowledge of release. Like this, like this she would breathe, sucking it in at first on a sobbing breath; then, as the lovely peace clouded her senses, more gently, until at last, sunk many fathoms into a stifling darkness, she would breathe with the shallow ease of a child asleep. For a long time she stood like this, not moving, until the anguish of self-pity rose like a breaking wave and drowned her in tears.

Oh, it was intolerable to be alone. She would not endure it. Only the thought that escape was here within reach could buoy up her courage, and that not for long. She would wait only until she had heard the final word, and then make haste to be done. "What nonsense you talk," said Edward's voice, "this is pure drama . . ." Yes, yes, of course; it was drama to be left alone at last; without youth, without money, without any point in living, a drama without audience and without applause. It was the distilled essence of anticlimax, trailing off into shabby weariness and exhaustion of spirit, and she would not suffer it. Did Edward think, knowing the truth as he must have done in the moment of leaving her, that she would accept it tamely? No,

no, that was not her way. There was a certain splendor in escape, in making the tragedy one's own and refusing to endure it, eluding the long-drawn-out humiliation by one surprising twist.

She wiped away her tears and plunged her hands in the water, letting the idea grow. This was a breathing space when she could think and plan, comforting herself with the knowledge of what she would do when the news came telling her that Edward was dead. There would be no shock about it; she knew already exactly how it would be; her heart would stop at the moment when the telephone rang, but she would be calm and still, her defenses ready prepared. She would be ready with her plan of escape, waiting only for the sign.

She poured away the dishwater and wiped out the bowl, then began with methodical slowness to dry the dishes. The Romans, she had heard, opened their veins on couches strewn with flowers; there was a certain fitness in that to which she responded, and her mind strayed vaguely over visual details as she moved about the kitchen. From time to time her tears shook her like an illness, and she sank into a chair or leaned against the table, hysterically crying.

Edward knew, when he went away, to what he was leaving her; he knew, and would not blame her. He had not discussed it at the end, but he had known, and had taken the furtive course of writing down two or three pregnant addresses and leaving them in the blotter. His solicitor; the bank manager; the name of an insurance company and the number of his policy; a dreary political secretary person, a woman, of whom Edward approved and under whose name and address he had written "advice, etc." What in God's name, she wondered, did he think they could do? There were a few hundred pounds in the bank and the insurance policy was worth a thousand; perhaps thirteen hundred in all. How long could it last her? Two years, perhaps, when the surgeon's fees and nursing-home bills were paid, and death duties and solicitors had each had their nibble; two dwindling years of paying rent and buying food and watching for the confounding day when it would all be gone. She would be fifty-two when that happened, and would then perhaps find out what became of middle-aged women of no resources, unskilled, unwanted, and alone; would discover what possibilities had lain uneasily at the back of Edward's mind when he had written "advice, etc." after that last address. What advice was worth having when one was fifty-two, and had nothing to offer?

"Have you no relations or friends?" she could hear the smooth voice saying, professionally kind. "No," she would say, "no, none"; for Lily, though one in blood, was in spirit neither. Well, at least Lily would be robbed of the satisfaction of having her come begging; the escape she intended was bright with refusal and pride, its dignity would scorch her.

What of those others, though, who could give her a living and might gladly do so, those strangers and old acquaintances whose wistful letters she burned from time to time? There had been no letters now for nearly a year, but the demand was still there, somewhere, if she had a mind to uncover it. It was twelve years since she had publicly buried her reputation, and now, if she wished, she might cautiously disinter it.

She sat down with her elbows on the kitchen table, staring in front of her, letting old images rise before her mind. It was a long time since she had seen them clearly, and now they oppressed her with an obscure and frightening pain, so that she stirred and shivered, putting her hands to her face. "Never go back to it," Edward had said, "whatever happens . . ." Cruel, unnecessary warning, when he himself, by the very end he had put to their life together, had made it impossible. It would have been easier to do in the face of his living opposition than now, in the eye of death. If he came back, as she knew he would not, she could have proposed it to him with less fear than to herself alone, weighed down by the answer in her own heart to the questions which all her life she had avoided asking. How, with Edward dead, could she take up the performance? By going away to die he had struck away all her pretenses with a completeness which argument and reason had never achieved, and she was left looking at them with a kind of shrinking wonder. So this was it, at last: one had got to face it. One could spend years in flirting with the idea of death, dressing it up and disguising it as a transition, a nothing; offering a facile consolation to others with the easy assurance of one whom it could not touch. And then it drew suddenly near, urgent as an unspoken question: and demanded an answer.

The arguments she had had with Edward long ago rose up and confronted her, and she heard her own voice now in its true tones, constructing its defenses out of hollow words, protecting the flimsy edifice she had built as a monument to vanity. She had never believed; not really; not after the beginning; but there had always been till

now the possibility of belief; a chink, a loophole, even though it had been stopped and narrowed until it was no broader than one's finger. Now that was gone, and searching her heart for some comforting trace of its existence, she was appalled to realize how long she had been without it. It must have gone years ago, and she had pretended not to see.

That being so, a return to her old deceits was made impossible even if she had wished it, for the slender basis on which she had contrived to build had been finally destroyed, and without it she would be forced to admit the true nature of what she did without benefit of hypocrisy or indulgence of self-delusion, in the harsh light of a late and ugly honesty. Ah no, it was not to be borne; she would not bear it. There was a point in self-loathing beyond which one could not go; and Emma shrank back, protesting. "I was wrong, deceived," she whispered, rejecting the moment of vision, "but it wasn't deliberate, I always hoped that something . . ." She sat still, protesting and arguing in frightened silence, hiding the eyes of her mind.

The clock in the sitting room struck nine, and she got up shivering. She would steady herself by some decisive action, by planning the course on which she was resolved; would get a grim comfort out of its deliberate drama. She wiped the tears from her face with the back of her hand and looked round the room, considering. Her gaze faltered at the gas stove, then settled there; grotesque and squalid instrument, but safe for her purpose. It was not the one that pride would have chosen, but it was private, familiar, and required little courage. The heroic and picturesque in death were hard to come by. Hadn't someone in the past, some woman, chosen the desperate means of swallowing live coals? Absurd and painful legend, one could never believe it. This was the way, the gentle, helpless, anesthetic release; its humble ease was better than any dignity.

She stood gazing at it in vacant fascination, plucking her lower lip. One would close the windows, of course, and shut the door; fetch cushions and fling them in a heap on the cold linoleum, drag blankets from the bed and make a pavilion of safety from which nothing could escape. And then, leaving everything behind, all fear and humiliation and uncertainty, creep quickly into one's Roman couch and draw the curtain close, shutting out light and lying as if in sleep while one's lungs drew in the hissing malodorous breath.

In loving detail her mind went over the scene. They would find

her at last, break down the door and find her curled under her coverlet in peace, escaped from them all, refusing to negotiate with their shabby alternatives, uttering her last word in tragic silence and beyond their reach.

What would they do? Call the police, perhaps, the ambulance . . . telephone Lily in Brighton and make her come, angry and frightened and defensive, blaming Suzanne.

Suzanne . . .

The thought of Suzanne pierced her with sudden shock, which at first she did not recognize as relief. Of course, Suzanne. Why had her image eluded her till this moment? Suzanne would come home tonight and would be here tomorrow, cheerful and solicitous, playing the part of dutiful niece with sympathy and tact. She would surely be here when the news came from the nursing home, or if she were not, would come hurrying in with her latchkey before anything was done. No, not quite, not that; but at least she would come before it was too late, would open the front door and sniff the gas, and run to the kitchen with a face of terror, receiving at a blow the knowledge implied by the closed doors, the chilly silence, the evil smell. She would tear aside the blankets and turn off the tap, fling up the windows and set the doors ajar, and run with shaking hands to the telephone. And when the doctor came, she, Emma, would be drowsily opening her eyes, begging them faintly to leave her as she was, to leave her in peace and not cruelly drag her back. But they would, they would; and she would be sick and safe; her gesture made, her last word spoken, the tragic drama completed and herself tasting the consolation of their hushed applause.

Relief and weakness overwhelmed her, and she leaned against the table, covering her eyes, dazed by the feeling that all had happened before. She groped feebly after the evoked sensation, and presently recognized the dark top landing of the house on Brixton Hill, and herself crouching in her flannel nightgown against the banisters, praying God to take her. Then they would be sorry; then they would remember how pathetic she had been, and shed tears, and be ashamed of their cruelty. . . . And presently she had opened her eyes, and God had given her no sign, and she had crept back to the bedclothes, frightened and rejoicing.

She heard the soft sound of a latchkey-in the front door and started guiltily. Edward . . . ? She stared at the kitchen door with a wildness

which escaped Suzanne, blinking in the bright light as she came in, putting her key in her bag.

"Hullo, Uncle Edward gone?"

With reluctant effort Emma found her voice.

"Yes. He went at eight o'clock."

"Oh dear, I'd have come in earlier if I'd known. I was trying not to break in on your tête-à-tête." She laid her bag on the table and looked at Emma. "I say, you don't look very well, you know. You've been crying, haven't you?"

"A little," said Emma, pushing back her hair. Her face felt stiff with tears and her eyelids swollen. "I feel better now, it was only for a moment."

"Oh dear," said Suzanne again, her voice full of concern, "I do wish I'd come back earlier. What have you been doing?"

"Just clearing away and washing up. Nothing much."

"Oh, you *should* have left it. Don't you have a woman who comes in in the morning? Or I'd have done it, gladly. You are a goose, Aunt Emma."

"It gave me something to do," said Emma, trying to smile, "it was better than doing nothing."

"Well, anyhow," said Suzanne, "you look quite worn out. Why don't we have a cup of tea and then go to bed? You'll feel ever so much more cheerful after a good night's rest." She took off her gloves and filled the kettle at the sink. "Where are the matches? Oh, here they are. I always cook on electric at home, it's so much cleaner." She lit the big jet and turned it up full under the kettle, then went to the dresser and took down a teapot and cups. "Where d'you keep the milk? Oh, I see. Don't you find it awfully difficult without a refrigerator? I don't know how I lived before I got one; you really have to, with a baby. Shall I use this tray? Can I have a little cloth or something to cover it?—it'll look so much nicer. Where would I find the spoons? Oh yes, I've got some of these identical ones myself, in our picnic basket. I think Woolworths are wonderful." /

She chattered on, wandering about the kitchen, and Emma received each thoughtless prick, but without emotion. It would be different tomorrow. Well-meant and condescending kindness could no longer be offered when one had deliberately stepped within embracing distance of death.

Suzanne carried the tray into the sitting room and poked up the fire.

"There now, sit down and have a cigarette," she said. "D'you like your tea strong, or will it keep you awake? Tell me all about your plans for tomorrow."

"I haven't really got any," said Emma, looking startled.

"Well, let's make some, then. You ought to hear from the nursing home about lunchtime, so we won't want to go out before then. I don't suppose they'll let you see him until the following day, they hardly ever do. So once you've heard, wouldn't it be a good idea to go to the pictures? Or would you rather help me with my shopping and do a cinema in the evening? I've got a shopping list as long as my arm."

"We might do that," said Emma cautiously, not looking at Suzanne. "Why don't you do your shopping in the morning, and let's meet in the afternoon? I don't want to go out until I've heard, but that's no reason why you shouldn't."

"Oh, but I don't want to leave you alone. You're bound to be feeling awfully anxious and jumpy."

"I shan't be alone. Mrs. Duffy comes in the morning and I've got plenty to do. I'd much rather meet about teatime, or you could come for me here." ("Mrs. Duffy goes at twelve," she thought; "I shall know by then, and if Suzanne comes back at four . . .")

"Just as you like, Aunt Emma," said Suzanne kindly. "I'll get rid of my shopping in the morning and come back in the afternoon as early as I can."

"There's no hurry. I shan't be ready before four." ("I must have time," she thought, "if I want to do it . . . really . . .")

What she could not know was that Edward would linger under the anesthetic until evening, and that Suzanne would be back some hours before any message came, and would answer the telephone herself.

## Chapter XII

(1939)

WARWICK STREET MARKET WAS IN FULL CRY, NOISY with raucous chaffer of Saturday morning. Seven for six . . . four for a tanner . . . lovely lettuce, lady, nice cues . . . 'ere you are, Mother, one-and-nine *take* . . . flahs, lavly flahs, any bunch you like. . . . The pavement was crowded with slow-moving feet, pausing and considering, and the gutter under the stalls littered with shavings and cabbage leaves and broken fruit punnets, green-grocery refuse and torn newspaper through which dogs and children hunted.

Emma shifted her shopping bag to her free hand, refusing to be jostled. She stood her ground, looking deliberately about her, and mothers with prams, forcing their way through the crowd on the battering-ram principle, quailed under her imposing elderly gaze and steered to left and right with irritable dexterity.

"Nice peaches, lady? Apricots, grapes, bananas?" The little man who kept the best of the fruit stalls came out from behind his pyramid of fruit and leaves, seeing her linger. "Lovely grapes they are," he said persuasively, "sweet as sugar."

"I'll have half a pound of the sixpenny tomatoes," said Emma, throwing a quelling dignity into her voice. She held out the three-pence between two gloved fingers, concealing the hole in the thumb.

"Right you are," said the man cheerfully, tossing the paper bag into her palm. She moved off slowly, putting the parcel in her shopping bag, and after pausing to examine the window went into the baker's.

Here she had to wait, for there were several people in the shop already, and the two young lady assistants knew her of old as a tire-some customer who fingered the cakes and insisted on choosing her own loaf out of the window. She was the sort of customer who wanted taking down a peg, standing there in her shabby fur with that expression on her face; it was simply irresistible to leave her till last, and then toss the loaf into the bag and ring the three-halfpence change



out of the cash register with frigid impudence, one's face already turned to the next comer. Emma always found the girls in the baker's an ordeal, and today, dropped her eyes, feeling unequal to the battle. All right; they could have it their own way and treat her custom with contempt. It didn't matter.

She came out of the shop and went on to the end of the market, where she bought some pieces of frozen rabbit from the end stall; then walked slowly off in the direction of St. George's Square, choosing the shady pavement. "America Warns Japan" said the bill which the corner newsagent was clipping under a wire holder. She took in the words with an indifferent eye and decided against buying a paper. It was always the same: Japan warns Britain, Hitler warns France, Chamberlain flies to Munich: in the end you got sick of it. You couldn't afford to let it worry you, and if you did it made no difference. If they wanted a war they would have one, whether you cared or not; it was easier not to bother. Edward had always said it would happen again; in his later years at least, when he had grown discouraged. He had worn himself out over unalterable things, and in the end, though habit had preserved some of his early impetus, he had known himself defeated. A less obstinate conviction might have saved him; but no, she thought, he had gone on and on, straining at his impossible world of freedom and peace, and making certain of nothing but his own destruction.

How little people really altered, she thought; it was useless to try and wrench them out of their pattern. Edward had followed his and she her own, and neither had really changed or deflected the other. They had struggled for a time, first secretly and then with open rancor, and at last had done no more than declare a truce, a working arrangement of compromise and expedience.

Yet what in the first place determined the mold? Why had it been impossible to change, to follow the clear harsh daylight uncompromising course which he had demanded of her? Useless to wonder; the course was set long ago, and its soothing twilight comforted and enveloped her. If conscience haunted that twilight, it was better not examined. "One has to live," she said aloud, to no one in particular.

At the corner of St. George's Square she paused for a bus to go by, swinging emptily round toward its terminus on the Embankment. "Pimlico, The Monster" they sometimes said on their boards, and when she had first come to Pimlico and before she had known that

The Monster was a public house this direction had ironically amused her. Pimlico *was* a monster, in a way; a monster in reduced circumstances and a little shady, a wilderness of flaking porticoes and sad basements, with a decaying face. But in time it had grown friendly and matter-of-fact, the dilapidation of its side streets no longer oppressed her, and the basement railings of St. George's Square had the solidity of home.

She rested her bag on the top step and took out her latchkey, running her eye over the phalanx of bells and name plates, the empty slots, the visting cards stuck up with a drawing pin, which cluttered the doorframe. Her own was the only one in the whole collection which had the dignity of permanence; it had remained in the bottom slot beside its own bell for seven years, while the transient tenants of the upper floors had changed and shuffled. "Madame Shardiloe," it said in tiny copperplate, a neatly engraved arrow pointing to the bell.

She went down the back stairs cautiously, muttering at the bad light, and unlocked the door which in the house's prosperous and undivided days had led to the kitchen. "Timmy?" she called, "Timmy?" A gray long-haired cat jumped down from a cushion on the chest of drawers and ran toward her, exclaiming in a small voice. It arched itself against her legs and revolved round her, ardently thrusting its head at her skirt and ankles. "Poor Timmy, poor boy, poor boy," she murmured, stooping to caress the soft fleece and plumelike tail, "poor lovely boy, poor darling." She unpacked the parcels from her bag, whispering to the gray cat as she did so, letting him walk across and across the papers, smelling and purring. He ran with her, mewling, when she went through the passage to the scullery and put his pieces of rabbit in a saucepan of water and lit the gas-ring. "Greedy Timmy, greedy boy!" she said fondly as he ran back before her to the sitting room, his tail erect and curling at the tip like a Prince-of-Wales' feather.

She went to the sideboard, the oak one that had survived from Grasmere Avenue, and poured herself half a tumbler of neat whisky. She drank it slowly, moving vaguely about the room, straightening a cushion, a book, a vase of dying peonies. "Mustn't drink it all at once," she said to the cat, "must we, Timmy?" But she swallowed in steady sips, unable to put down the glass or resist the fierce cold pleasure of the drink, cleansing her dry throat and stinging her nostrils. When it was gone she relinquished the tumbler with a sigh, and opening cupboards and drawers and straying backwards and forwards between

sitting room and scullery, assembled a sketchy lunch on the end of the table. The new loaf, butter, a box of tinselled cheese cubes and the bag of tomatoes were set down on the polished surface with a knife and plate. The cat picked its way among them, fastidiously smelling.

Emma kicked off her shoes while she ate, and rubbed her stockinged feet with relief on the carpet. One's feet were abominably tender this hot weather, even the oldest shoes were painful. She would put on her felt slippers when she had finished and sit with her feet up for a bit if there were time. Mrs. Macklin was the only appointment this afternoon, and that wasn't till four o'clock; she could even lie down if she wanted. Still, she thought, sighing over her bread and cheese, she had better get dressed first in case anyone else came; they often did on Saturdays.

When she had finished eating she cleared the table, padding backwards and forwards on stockinged feet, then lingered irresolutely at the sideboard. The cat leaped up, weaving its way between the fancy candlesticks and the maidenhair fern, and thrust itself against her. "Just a tiny one, Timmy," she explained, stooping to take the bottle out of the sideboard, "just a tiny, tiny." She poured out the whisky and held the bottle up to the light, anxiously peering. Would it last over tomorrow, or would she have to go out for a new bottle this evening? Insupportable thought, when she was so tired already; yet the long easeful apathy of Sunday, when she stayed in bed all day as in a refuge, scarcely bothering to eat, would collapse into discomfort without that sustaining presence in the sideboard. She drained her glass and took several coffee beans out of a cigarette tin and put them in her mouth. What was it that one of the Miss Godfreys had recommended, hundreds of years ago, as being good for the breath? She chewed the beans reflectively, trying to remember. Mr. Morton's dressing room, and the hot glitter of the Godfreys' spangles and roses, and . . . peppermints, was it? But peppermints smelt just as bad in their way, to the person who wasn't eating them. Coffee beans were better.

She picked up her shoes and went into the dark bedroom at the back of the basement and snatched at the curtains, admitting a greenish light. Ridiculous these old houses were, without electricity; Pimlico was in the Dark Ages still, bristling with gas jets, and when electricity came they would put up the rent. Peering and muttering she opened

the wardrobe, distinguishing the velveteen by touch, and laid it on the bed. The cat jumped up beside it and sat in the tumbled blankets, gently drawing up the surface of the wool with its claws, watching with dilated pupils while she dressed.

She left her blouse and skirt lying as she dropped them, and hooked up the side fastenings of her dress, doing everything by touch. The V-shaped lace at the neck looked dingy in the mirror, but perhaps it was only the light; the amber beads and scarab brooch would redeem it. She tidied the front of her hair with a comb, looking anxiously in the glass. The gray roots were showing again, the inky blackness withdrawing slyly from the scalp and parting. How vile one looked in this depressing light, green from the sour old plane tree at the back of the house: a bad light for any purpose, yet it fell with cold exactness on the pouches under one's eyes, the loose uncertain contour of cheek and neck, the heavy lines running from nose to mouth. Her hands searched among the mess on the dressing table, among hairpins and bottles and combs full of dust and hair, and found a little round red greasy pad which she applied to her cheekbones, then powdered her face with a clot of cotton wool, licked her two forefingers and passed them several times over her lashes and brows. She looked again in the mirror and was reassured. Now at least she saw a copy of the face that she remembered, the dark eyes, the broad forehead, the sweep of hair; only the outlines were a little blurred and careless, disappointing somehow, as though the design had been cheapened by a shoddy hand.

Well, what did you expect at fifty-nine? What did it matter?

Her fingers encountered a cigarette among the hairpins, and she put it in her mouth, rolling it sideways because of the taste of powder, and searched for a match. She blew the first mouthful of smoke in a thin stream at her reflection, and smiled experimentally, feeling the blessing of whisky at work in her veins. Haloed in smoke she looked mysteriously handsome again, occult, baffling, and powerful, a weaver of spells and possessor of secrets, priestess and oracle. "Enigmatic," she said aloud to the mirror.

A bell rang in the passage outside her door, and she stood still, listening. "Damn and blast," she whispered under her breath. She would not be able to lie down now. She went into the passage and pressed the buzzer which released the front door. In a minute steps

came hesitantly along the hall overhead and a female figure loomed indistinctly at the head of the stairs.

"Madame Shardiloe?"

"Yes?"

The visitor came down awkwardly, holding the banister, and revealed herself as a neat young woman in a preposterous little hat with an eye-veil, and horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Good afternoon," she said nervously, "I wonder if I could have an appointment? Miss Rossiter gave me your address; I'm a friend of hers."

"Come in," said Emma graciously, and led the way into the sitting room. She sat down in the armchair beside the table and waved her visitor to the rug-covered couch. "I don't know you, do I?" she said, subjecting the girl to a dark and penetrating gaze, the pythoness look which impressed and frightened, usefully preparing the ground.

"No," said the girl, "I ought to have telephoned, but I just happened to be near Victoria and I thought I'd chance it. Miss Rossiter sent me, really. She told me that you were wonderful with her: she comes quite often, doesn't she?"

Emma smiled to put the girl at her ease. She was all right, obviously; good material. One had to be so careful with strangers, especially when they came in pairs, policewomen disguised in country hats and tweeds. . . . This girl was a genuine customer, with something on her mind.

"Miss Rossiter," said Emma, "is quite an old friend. She consults me very frequently."

"Oh yes, I know. She told me so. I suppose I couldn't stay now, this afternoon? Saturday's really my only time."

Emma turned with dignity and looked at the clock.

"It depends what you want," she said; "there's nearly an hour before my next appointment. If you didn't want too long a sitting . . ."

"Well, I was wondering," said the girl timidly. "Miss Rossiter generally has the five-shilling fortune, doesn't she? Would that take too long?" She blinked through her spectacles, overawed by the slow grandeur of Emma's manner.

"A plain reading from the cards is five shillings," said Emma loftily; "with the crystal, seven-and-six, psychometry half a guinea, and a full sitting with crystal, psychometry and clairvoyance, one guinea."

The girl blushed.

"I should like just cards and the crystal," she said, looking ashamed. Emma nodded and closed her eyes.

"You're in a very worried and perplexed state of mind."

"Well . . . I am, as a matter of fact."

"My dear, I can feel it. I could tell from your vibrations the moment you came into the room." She opened her eyes and her dark gaze embraced the shrinking figure. "You're divided in your mind, torn between two courses of action. . . . This is an important moment in your life, and oh, how difficult! You're surrounded by influences, you want help, advice . . . When I see a little more clearly I shall be able to help you. You must relax, my dear, and not be nervous. We must achieve harmony together."

The girl smiled and licked her lips, her eyes bright with fascination. Emma nodded significantly and drew the crystal toward her, lifting a corner of the velvet cover so that the clear cold bubble showed itself in the folds, magnifying its glimmer of reflected light. She opened a shallow drawer in the table and took out a pack of cards, laying them beside the crystal with a caressing gesture, displaying her heavy rings.

"Now," she said, getting majestically to her feet, "we'll have a little less light, I think. We won't be disturbed by light and noises from the street. The crystal is like a sensitive eye, you know; a crude light blinds it."

"Does it really? How wonderful," said the girl, unbuttoning her gloves.

The curtain rings slid smoothly on their rail, and the girl sat still and expectant in the greenish dusk, her eyes fixed on the living eye of the crystal.

THE END















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